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Vol. L.



THERE, STANDING DIRECTLY IN HIS PATH, WAS RED DARRELL, THE ROAD-AGENT, OR HIS GHOST.

The Gold King;

OR,

Montebello, the Magnificent.

A Romance of Mining Life.

BY HON. W. F. CODY ("BUFFALO BILL").

CHAPTER I.

THE ILL-OMEN MINE.

A SHOT rung through a wild canyon that penetrated a rugged mountain range in the, then, thinly-settled Territory of Colorado.

Though but one shot had been fired, illuminating the darkness for an instant, as might a flash of lightning, a thousand crags, peaks, cliffs, and ravines caught up the sound, and as many echoes reverberated through the hills, resounding like a regiment of infantry in action while it retreated, until the roar of seeming combat appeared to die out far away in the distance.

Following the shot had come a glimmer of light, as the door of a cabin, nestling away under the overhanging canyon, was flung open, and then darkened by the form of a man gliding within the isolated house.

Then came an angry exclamation, a smothered oath, the sound of a struggle, a groan and a fall and all was still within the cabin. Without the silence remained unbroken.

A few moments of awful stillness, and once more there came the glimmer from the open door as a man came forth.

An instant he stood, gazing up and down the canyon; then he glided away like a grim specter in the darkness, while, soon after, came the sound of iron hoofs clattering rapidly along a mountain trail, and gradually dying away in the distance.

Again a silence fell upon the wild scene that could be felt, and from within the cabin came a deep groan.

Soon the door slowly opened and the form of a man was visible in the glimmering light.

But not erect, as man in his strength should be, but upon hands and knees, swaying from side to side as he came forth.

Slowly, painfully he dragged himself along down the canyon, appearing in the darkness like a wild beast as, upon hands and knees, he made his way, the groans ever and anon wrung from his lips by anguish sounding like an angry growl, thus the more bearing out the idea that he was not a human being.

Suddenly he sunk prostrate upon the earth, a cry of agony breaking through his shut teeth, and in piteous accents he wailed:

"Oh, God! I cannot reach the camps, for I am failing fast—*dying*. But I have written my will here, and my curse upon those who do not its bidding," and he shook aloft a white object which he held with a deathlike grip.

One instant he held his clinched hand upward, his face turned toward the glittering stars, as though in prayer; then, with a low moan, he sunk down in a heap, not a quiver even moving his frame.

Time dragged along in darkness and silence—a silence broken only now and then by the howl of a wolf or the cry of a night-bird on the hills, and at last dawn began to cast its uncanny light over the scene.

Then the mountain tops grew rosy, the valley still resting in shadows; the sunlight came to cast its rays upon lofty crags and burnished them like silver; soon the dew-sprinkled leaves and grass in the vales, the rocks and pebbles in the canyons looked like myriads of diamonds.

Suddenly a voice broke in on the chatter and chirping of the birds—the voice of a man singing a merry carol, the echoes joining in the chorus.

Then, coming up the canyon, appeared the singer—a bronzed-faced, heavily-bearded miner, in red shirt, top-boots and carrying his pick and shovel upon his shoulders.

As quickly as though a shot had been fired at him, he ceased his song and came to a standstill, while he dropped his mining-tools and let his hand fall upon the revolver in his belt.

"Waal! thar's been mischief about when yer see dead folks lyin' round loose."

"It are Kit, the Stranger, as I live, and he have but gone the way of all them as tackles the Ill-Omen Mine."

"The boys is coming, but I'll jist hasten 'em on, for thar is work for Vigilantes here."

So saying, he raised his clear voice in one long, loud halloo!

It rung like a bugle's notes down the canyon, and penetrated the mountains a mile away.

Again and again rose the voice of the young miner, for he was young and handsome too, frank-faced and fearless, now bursting forth in thunder tones, now winding clear as a cornet's notes, in one loud, ringing, prolonged shout of alarm.

"I guesses they can hear that back in Gold Dust City," he muttered, as he stooped and

picked up his shovel and pick and started on toward the form of the man who had died there in the darkness and silence a few hours before.

"Halloo!"

The sound came faintly up the canyon, and the young miner turned and listened.

Again and again the halloo was repeated, each time louder than the last.

"The boys heard my call, and are a-coming on the jump, for they knows Bugle Bill don't give that cry for nothing, when breath are so precious in these parts whar it are cut off so suddint by revolvers and bowie."

By this time he had reached the form, all in a heap upon the earth, and throwing aside his mining tools he bent over it, laying his hand gently upon the forehead, as he turned the body over.

"It are Kit, the Stranger, and he are dead."

"Ah! he has some papers with writing on 'em clutched for keeps in his hand; but I'll leave 'em thar until the boys gits here, for when fool-in' round dead folks I wants witnesses."

"He hev got a wound thar in his heart—a bullet wound, and—yes, a knife-thrust too."

"It were warm work in this canyon last night, and Kit died hard, I'll bet dust on it."

"Then he started for Gold Dust City, for thar's his trail, whar he crawled along, and it's painted red too."

"Poor fellow, he couldn't git no further than here, and jist give in his chips to ther Mighty Master who wanted 'em—Ah! there comes the boys, like a pack o' hounds on ther trail."

As the miner spoke, around a bend in the canyon appeared a score of miners, stretched out in line, as though running a race, their picks and shovels upon their shoulders, and their right hands free to grasp the ever-ready revolver.

They were a hardy set of men, bearded, fearless, uncouth and dangerous, armed to the teeth, and ready for fun or fight, whichever might turn up.

"Ho, Bugle Bill! who've yer made cold meat of?" cried a tall fellow in advance, panting like a hound.

"Yes, Bill, we heerd that wild bugle-note o' yourn tune up, and we come fer all we was worth," said the second man, and then all dashed up to the spot, where Bugle Bill stood erect, pointing in silence to the body at his feet.

"Kit the Stranger!" cried a chorus of voices, as the miners recognized the upturned face.

"How did it come, Bugle Bill, that you had to kill him?" asked the miner who had led the others in the run.

"Me kill him, Modoc Dan?" cried the young miner, with a flush of anger.

"I found him thar as I come along, clutchin' them papers as you sees him, and thar are whar he crawled from ther cabin, ter die here while draggin' his way down ther canyon toward Gold Dust City."

"That are so, and he are cold as ice; lend me a hand, Bugle Bill, to git these papers out o' his grip, that we may see what they has to say."

It was impossible to take the papers from the cold, clammy hand, so tight was the hold of the stiffened fingers, and Modoc Dan took his knife and drew it across the tendons.

"Don't soil 'em with his blood, Dan," said one.

"They is already soiled, pard; you see, he has writ on this sheet with his own blood, bein' evidently unable to rise and get the ink and pen off of the shelf in his cabin," said Modoc Dan, looking at the papers.

One was an official envelope, sealed and addressed to

"MISS KATE KITTREDGE,
BUENA VISTA RANCH,
SANTA FE,
NEW MEXICO."

Upon the red sealing-wax that secured the envelope was written:

"Accursed be he who breaks this seal."

Besides this envelope there was a slip of paper, upon which had been evidently scratched, with a pointed stick, dipped in the red dye that flowed from the breast of the wounded man, the words:

"I have met the fate of those before me who have worked the Ill-Omen Mine; but I am its owner, and I will it to one who will come to claim it."

"If a year goes by and no one comes to claim it, it may go to whoever else has the pluck to hold it along with the contents of my cabin."

"This envelope I beg to have sent to its address."

"Should the seal be broken by man, my everlasting curse attend him, as, also, may it fall upon him who strikes pick in the Ill-Omen Mine until one year has gone by from this date."

"These are my last words and wishes, for I know that I am dying, and the curse of a dying man be upon the head of the one who fails to do my bidding."

"KIT, THE STRANGER."

"Owner of the Ill-Omen Mine."

Such was the communication, written in his own blood, of the man who had died there in the silence and darkness of the canyon by the hand of an assassin.

Not one word as to who had struck him the deadly blow, not one ray of light to clear up the mystery of his death!

Not even his own name signed to the last

words he had ever written, only Kit, the Stranger, the nickname he had borne the year he had lived like a hermit in his cabin, more than a mile from the mining-camp of Gold Dust City.

In silence the men stood around the body, after Modoc Dan had read the lines, each seemingly waiting for another to speak.

At last Modoc Dan broke the silence with:

"Pards, the words of a dying man must be obeyed, for we wants no curse upon our heads, and I will take charge of this letter, and send it ter ther leddy it are writ' to."

"No, Modoc Dan, yer is no more nor ther rest o' us, while Bugle Bill are ther one thet found Stranger Kit, and were more of a pard to him than any o' us, so he's ther one ter 'minister on ther last will an' testament o' deceased,' as lawyers says."

"Mungo are serenely right, pards, fer Bugle Bill are ther man," added another of the party.

"Yas! yas!"

"Give up ther dockimint, Modoc!"

"Turn ther papers over ter Bill!"

Such were the cries that went around the crowd, showing that the miners did not believe in allowing Modoc Dan to act as the executor of The Stranger, as the dead man was known in the camps, from the fact that no one knew what his real name was, from whence he had come, or aught else regarding him, excepting that he had come into Gold Dust City one day with papers giving him a frontier claim upon Ill-Omen Mine, which, though panning out well, had proved fatal to every owner who had put his pick into it.

"Pards, if you says I are to take ther papers, and carry out Stranger Kit's dyin' wishes, I'll do it, though Modoc Dan do seem most awful anxious to do so," said Bugle Bill.

"I are not anxious; but bein' as I has ther dockymints, I sees no reason fer turnin' 'em over ter others ter do what I kin do, so I calkulates to keep 'em and foller Stranger Kit's instructions," doggedly responded Dan.

"Does yer put yerself ag'in' this entire outfit, Modoc?" threateningly asked one of the men, and a man who was popular in the camps.

Dan glanced over the faces turned upon his own, and he read there a determination to force him to obey their wishes, so he determined to yield gracefully, and said in an indifferent tone:

"Lor', fellers, I thought yer were jokin', as ther papers can't be much account nohow, and I'll be glad to give 'em up. Here they is, Bugle Bill," and he held out the sealed envelope.

"I'll take the other paper too, Dan, for I must hev both," remarked the handsome young miner quietly, and he did not fail to observe the glitter of anger that flashed up into Modoc Dan's face as he handed over the dying man's last words, so rudely written with the life-current that had ebbed from his veins.

"Thank you, Dan. Now let us bury poor Kit yonder under that tree, and then I'll set things aright in the cabin, lock the door and take the key," and this suggestion was carried out faithfully, the dead miner being buried decently, and the cabin, which showed marks of the death-struggle, set to rights, fastened up securely, and the key taken by Bugle Bill, to hold in keeping for the coming of the heir, or until the year had rolled by, when it would be decided who should be the owner of the Ill-Omen Mine.

CHAPTER II.

THE GOLD KING OF GOLD DUST.

"Who killed Stranger Kit?"

That was the question that every man in Gold Dust City was asking his companion, and which no one could answer.

The miners whose claims were located in the hills beyond Stranger Kit's cabin, and who had found the dead man in the canyon, had not gone on to their work after the burial, but returned to Gold Dust City to talk over the matter, all but Bugle Bill, who had kept on to his claim, for he was a man that seldom idled away his time.

It took but a very short while for the news of the murder to spread through the mining-camps known by the high-sounding appellation of Gold Dust City, and the score of saloons were soon crowded with wild-looking men eagerly discussing the pros and cons of the case.

Had several of the miners been shot down in a personal encounter it would have caused very little excitement in that desperate community; but for a miner to be assassinated in his cabin, a man known to all, yet with no intimates, and not known to have any enemies, it was indeed cause for comment.

Then, too, the scene of the murder had much to do with the excitement, as the Ill-Omen Mine had borne a weird reputation ever since Gold Dust City had been a mining-camp.

It was said that the discoverer of the mine had been killed by his partner the very night after he had told him the secret of his having "struck it rich," and though nothing could be really proved against the accused, he had been closely watched, and when he was about to start for home, having dug out a snug little sum of gold, he was seized by a band of masked men

and swung up to the limb of a tree that overhung his cabin.

As there were miners in the camps who knew his antecedents, word was sent to his home of his fate, and soon after his wife, who had long believed him dead, arrived upon the scene, accompanied by a second husband, and claimed the mine as her property.

No one disputing, she took possession, the second husband calmly stepping into the other's shoes, and the pair made themselves most comfortable in a new cabin, and had the best that the country could afford in the way of luxuries.

But one morning some passing miners found the woman lying on the floor, dangerously wounded, and she told how her husband had shot her, robbed her and fled, leaving her dead, as he believed.

The kind-hearted miners nursed the wounded woman back to health, and many a gold-digger, struck with her beauty, offered her his heart, his hand, his cabin and his prospects; but, refusing to marry a third time, she shook the dust of Gold Dust City from her feet and departed for parts unknown.

The next heard of her was when Stranger Kit put in an appearance with the title to the mine, which he had purchased from the widow, and over which hung the name of Ill-Omen.

Unheeding the warnings of the citizens of Gold Dust, Stranger Kit entered upon his rights and began to dig, some said with marvelous luck, and, living away from his fellow-men, like a hermit, he, in the end, as the reader knows, but added to the superstition hanging over the mine by losing his life there at the hand of an unknown assassin.

Such were the stories told over and over again, in Gold Dust City, the day of the murder, and, of all the bold spirits in the mining-camps, hardly one would have been willing just then to assume the proprietorship of Ill-Omen Mine.

And many bold spirits there were in the collection of mining-camps dignified as Gold Dust City.

Stretching along through the mountains, rich in precious ore, were hundreds of cabins, here and there grouped more thickly together into a settlement, consisting of a saloon or two, a blacksmith shop, several stores, and a building of considerable pretensions, called by courtesy Paradise Hotel, though, from the wild orgies that were of occasional occurrence therein, it would seem that the nickname of "The Inn Purgatory" was more appropriate.

This hotel was a feature of Gold Dust City, as its landlord was a character of the place, for it could boast of comfortable beds, good living and a bar not looked for in a region so remote from civilization.

The landlord was a one-armed man, who, rumor had it, had been an officer of the army; but who had left it to keep hotel.

At any rate, he was called "Colonel" Cadaver. Whether that was his true name or not, no one knew; still, as he was a most cadaverous-looking specimen of humanity, it suited him well enough.

He was tall, heavily built, and a giant in strength, while he always had a disagreeable habit of carrying his single hand in the breast of his uniform coat, for he dressed in half uniform, of blue coat, slouch hat and cavalry boots.

People said his fingers constantly grasped a revolver, so that he could never be caught off his guard. Certain it was, on the occasion when he was forced "to show his hand" in a fracas in his tavern, he had "held trumps" to an alarming extent, for he had always killed his man.

Being a dead-shot, the colonel was dreaded in Gold Dust City, and his house usually was orderly, as its landlord knew just how to quell a disturbance.

The clerk of the "Paradise" was a small, graceful Mexican, with great black eyes full of expression, and a face that, had a woman been the possessor of it, would have been called beautiful.

He was wont to sit in a caddy called the office, and calmly attend to his duties; but, on two occasions, when the colonel needed his aid, he had come out of his little den, a revolver in each hand, and had made a "record" for himself as a sure shot and one who was not to be trifled with.

With no one was Señor Señora, as he was called, on familiar terms, and, when not on duty at the hotel, he was mounted on his fiery mustang riding through the mountains in search of game, as he said.

The "porter" of the Paradise was a negro, six feet seven inches in height, and as powerful as he looked. He seemed to idolize the colonel and Señor Señora.

Next in order came the "bell-boys," seven in number, and all Chinese, who also did the work as waiters upon the table, "chambermaids" and "laundresses."

Like the señor and the porter they went armed, and were a formidable brigade as a reserve for the colonel.

In the kitchen were two Irishwomen, fair, fat, forty and full of fight, and these two had one day quelled a disturbance by appearing upon the

scene, the one with a frying-pan and hot grease, the other bearing a tea-kettle of boiling water.

The stables of the Paradise were presided over by an ex-stage-driver with one leg. He had four Indians as assistants, who also served as guides to any one desiring to find certain mining-camps through the mountains, or go on a prospecting tour.

Altogether the Paradise was well supplied with comforts and help, and if the colonel had started on the war-path with what the miners called his "army," all of Gold Dust City would have retreated before him.

There were several storekeepers of Gold Dust, as the camp was generally called, who had their families with them, and here and there a miner who had "struck it rich," had brought his wife and family; but otherwise the fair sex in the place was not represented, though now and then the colonel could boast of entertaining a lady guest at the Paradise, who had doubtless come there in search of some truant lord and master, or stopped to rest when passing along on the Overland to other points.

As might be expected, this particular mining-camp was not a desirable dwelling-place for the lovers of peace and contentment, though it was just the locality where a missionary was most needed.

And into Gold Dust one happened to come, arriving on the stage one evening in the midst of a fight at the Paradise, and just as the colonel and his army had driven a gang of desperadoes pell-mell out of the house.

Old Overland, the stage-driver, and a man who had grown gray on the box, and knew the country from Omaha to Denver, had found that the Reverend Peter Brindle was on a missionary tour into the wilds, to "snatch brands from the burning," as he had expressed it, whether they were pale-faces or red-skins, and having been sent out by his church with a plethora of carpet-bag—it was full of Bibles and tracts—and an empty purse, the good-hearted "prince of the reins" had invited him to a ride, when overtaking him on the road, trudging along, his baggage swung upon a cane over his shoulder.

"Pard, you is a durned fool," he said frankly, as the missionary clambered up to a seat beside him.

The Reverend Brindle looked at Old Overland in utter amazement.

"You be a stranger in these parts?" continued the driver.

"Verily I am, my friend."

"Ef yer were not, yer'd never walk *this* trail. I heerd of yer back at ther station, and how yer had more religion than money, so I just determined to give yer a lift, for I knowed some red-skin would git yer scalp and yer carpet-bag, afore yer'd gone far, and if a Injun didn't a road-agint w'u'd."

"My friend, would they murder and rob a gospel teacher?" asked the Reverend Brindle, in a tone of horror.

"Ef yer doubts my word, I'll just let yer down and give yer a chance ter find out."

"No! no! I do not doubt you, my friend; but I was shocked to hear men were so vile."

"Vile? Yer hain't seen no wickedness, old man, until yer knows ther sinners o' Gold Dust. That are ther vin'yard o' sin whar you sh'u'd grub in with yer gospel pick."

"Whew! if you wants ter do good, locate in Gold Dust, pard. But, what are your name?"

"Reverend Peter Brindle, missionary-at-large."

"That goes beyond me, so I'll jist call yer Parson Pete, and hev yer baptized under that name when yer reaches Gold Dust."

"Now what has yer in thet grip?"

"Bibles and tracts for the heathen."

"Will yer go ter Gold Dust?"

"Yes, my friend."

"Then yer has struck ther trail."

"Whose trail?"

"Ther heathen! That are ther heathen headquarters, and sinners are as thick thar, as big words in them Bibles in yer grip-sack."

"Say it's a go, parson, and I'll contribute one month at ther Paradise fer yer, and in thet time yer sh'u'd hev got acquainted and yanked suthin' out o' ther boys."

"I will go there, my friend."

"That's ther talk, Parson Pete," cried Old Overland; and thus it was the Reverend Peter Brindle came to be a sojourner in Gold Dust City.

As I have said, he arrived in the midst of a fracas; but this was soon quelled. He was introduced to the colonel, given as good a room as the hotel had, and enjoyed his supper amazingly.

The next morning he started upon his missionary labors; but returned early, his coat split up the back, a black eye, and his high hat mashed down over his forehead.

The wicked of Gold Dust City had resented being corrected, and Parson Pete was discouraged, and was going to join Old Overland on his back trip toward civilization, when there rode up to the hotel a horseman upon whom his eyes became riveted. Evidently he had not expected to see such a personage in these wilds.

The one in question was mounted upon a

horse as black as ink, with a glossy hide, arched neck, and saddle, bridle and trappings that fairly blazed with gold.

Springing to the ground, while his horse stood unhitched, awaiting his will, the rider towered to six feet, had great broad shoulders, a waist as slender as a woman's, small hands and feet, and was attired in a riding-suit of black velvet jacket, snow-white corduroy pants, stuck in his boot-tops, the latter coming up above his knees, and with solid gold spurs ornamenting the heels.

He wore a spotless shirt, the bosom handsomely embroidered; a white silk scarf about his neck, in which glittered a ruby of enormous size; his head was sheltered with a soft sombrero, around which he wore a chain of solid gold, a miniature revolver hanging to one end and serving as a tassel, and a tiny diamond-hilted bowie-knife to the other.

The man's face was not less striking than his superb form and elegant attire, for it was full of power, every feature being strongly marked, well cut, and the eyes full of feeling and intensely piercing.

About his waist was an embroidered belt, with gold buckle, and holding a pair of revolvers, with pearl stocks and gold mountings, while a bowie-knife—the inseparable companion of men in that region—had a sheath and hilt of the same precious yellow metal.

"Who is he? Verily I should like to know!" said Parson Pete, forgetting his own dilapidated condition at sight of the stranger.

It was Señor Señora he addressed, and who had been sympathizing with the missionary in his misfortunes.

"He is known as the Gold King of Colorado through the mountains; but here we call him Montebello the Magnificent," answered the Mexican clerk.

"Verily, verily, but he is magnificent, my friend!" and as Parson Pete spoke the eyes of the Gold King fell upon him, and he said:

"Are you Parson Pete, sir, may I ask?"

"Yes, my friend."

"Old Overland told me of you, and that he had urged you to stay here; but who has been maltreating you in this camp?" and the eyes of the Gold King flashed dangerously.

"I went among them, my friend, in the way of my duty, and they shocked me with their cries, and you see how they used me, while they actually stole my Bibles and told me to git."

"Well, Parson Pete, you are here and have come to stay, for I say so!"

"To-morrow is Sunday, and I'll hire the Nabob Saloon for you to preach in, and I'll see that those who come will not make a circus of you," and turning to the landlord the Gold King continued:

"Colonel, this man is my friend, and I pay for his accommodations, so give him the best you've got, and tell any of the boys that wish to step on him that I will call on them for a settlement."

"He shall be protected, Señor Montebello, as your friend and my guest," was the colonel's answer, and thus was Parson Pete made happy in the Paradise, while, next day, in spite of his black eye and scratched face, he preached at the Nabob Saloon to a full congregation—full in more than one sense of the word—while the Gold King sat on the impromptu pulpit—a couple of dry-goods boxes—by the side of the parson, and the services passed off without an interruption, as many had predicted there would be.

Such was Gold Dust City, at the time our romance opens.

CHAPTER III.

PARSON PETE'S DISCOVERY CAUSES THE GOLD KING TO MAKE A VISIT.

It may be well assumed by the thoughtful reader that Parson Pete did not do himself justice in the sermon he delivered under such strange auspices.

He was a good man, knew more of the Bible than he did of human nature, could make a church ring with his melodious voice, if raised in prayer, song, or denunciation of the wicked; and though he had an appetite that made his Chinese waiter at the Paradise roll his eyes in amazement, the missionary meant to do right in all things.

Had he known just what was before him he would never have sought a mining-camp to convert sinners; but being there, and backed by the Gold King, he meant to remain.

He saw before him as he arose in prayer as wild a crowd as ever were congregated, all armed to the teeth, and the fear that he might offend some of them and become a target for their shots, caused him to pray for sinners in every part of creation excepting those of Gold Dust City.

In singing the first hymn Parson Pete saw that he made an impression, for he had a fine voice and rolled out his notes in a way that excited the admiration of his congregation to such a pitch that they immediately shook the house with their applause, and called for an encore with shouts of:

"You can shout ter mansions in ther skies, parson!"

"Give it to us ag'in, Peter!"

"Yank out another, pard!"

"Oh, but you kin sing, Gospil sharp."

Parson Pete was pleased, and he gave as an encore "Shout the Glad Tidings," which was received with tumultuous applause.

In his sermon Parson Pete called his congregation "most beloved brethren," and told the story of the Prodigal Son, but did not dare make the application to any one there.

When the time came for the hat to go around the Gold King arose, took his own handsome sombrero, placed in it a handful of gold, and passed it through the gathered mob, handing it back to Parson Pete heavy with the generous contribution.

The services ended, Montebello invited the parson home to dinner with him, and Nabob, the saloon-keeper, loaned him a horse, for he had moved his bar outside to accommodate the parson, and had done a tremendous business with the crowd of sinners outside who could not get within the building, so took a different kind of spiritual comfort without.

The Gold King mounted his superb black horse, and with Parson Pete by his side, struggling manfully to keep on the back of a small gray, the two started out of Gold Dust City to the house of the former.

This house occupied a space overlooking the mining-camps, and was overhung by a lofty mountain range.

It was beautifully situated, and the cabin was not only the finest in those parts, but it was strong as a fort, and the interior was furnished with the luxury of a city home.

The cabin had a wide hallway, and a couple of rooms upon either side, with a stable in the rear, a small plot of land cultivated as a vegetable garden, and other indications of a model home one would not expect to find in that region.

A negro man, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow of forty, came forward and took the horses as the Gold King and Parson Pete rode up, and a negro woman soon after announced dinner.

The parson was astounded to eat with a silver fork, and drink from a silver goblet, and gazed at his host in wonder, while he asked:

"Are you not afraid, my friend, of being robbed, living as you do far away from the camps?"

"Oh, no, parson, not now, though they did attempt it once," was the quiet response.

"And robbed you?"

"Do you remember seeing three graves as we came up the mountains?"

"Yes, friend, and you said some acquaintances of yours were buried there."

"True; I made their acquaintance the night they attempted to rob me, but the acquaintance was not lasting," was the significant remark, and Parson Pete shivered, while he muttered:

"Verily, verily, but you did slay the Philistines, my friend."

Parson Pete was silent a moment, and then broke the silence with:

"But do you live here all alone, my friend?"

"Yes, with Indigo and Blue."

"Indigo blue?" cried the parson.

"Indigo is my negro man, whom you saw, and Blue is his wife," was the explanation of the Gold King, and then he turned the subject from his own affairs to the saving of souls, through the medium of Parson Pete, telling him that he would build him a log church in Gold Dust City, and that he did not doubt but that, as a teacher in week days and a preacher on Sunday, he might do well even in that wicked camp.

"There is one young man, parson, in Gold Dust, who will be your ally in song, for on account of his ringing, clear voice, the boys call him Bugle Bill, and I would advise you to look him up when you return to camp to-night, for he is a square young fellow, brave as a lion, and will be your friend," said the Gold King.

Promising to look Bugle Bill up, Parson Pete took his departure, with many thanks to Montebello for the protection and kindness extended to him.

As he rode down the mountain trail, toward the Overland road, he suddenly heard a distant hail.

Drawing rein, he heard, wafted down the canyon, a long, winding cry, as though from one in distress.

Instantly Parson Pete turned his horse and rode in the direction from whence the sound came.

Again and again it came to his ears, that long, loud cry, ending almost in a wail.

Hastening on the parson soon drew rein and sprung from his horse, for a man lay upon the ground before him, and at the base of a high cliff.

It was Bugle Bill, his head blood-stained from a wound over the temple, and his leg broken, evidently by a fall from the cliff above.

"It was me who hailed yer, pard, and I am glad yer have come, though I don't remember to have seen your face before," said Bugle Bill, his voice faint and trembling.

"I heard your call, my friend, and verily am I glad to have come."

"I am a stranger in these parts, and was on my way from the Gold King's to the camps, when I heard you call."

"Let me help you upon my horse, for you need care," said the kind-hearted parson.

"I'm a heavy man, pard, and helpless, so yer better strike for ther Gold King's and tell him Bugle Bill's here in hard luck, and he'll come."

"Are you Bugle Bill?" asked the parson quickly.

"I am thet pilgrim, what thar is left of me, fer my leg is broke and my head come in contact with a bullet, while I hev laid here since yesterday afternoon."

"No! well I'll go at once and you'll soon be well, while many are the hymns we'll sing together," and Parson Pete mounted quickly and dashed away down the canyon.

In half an hour he was back again, and along with him were the Gold King and the negro Indigo.

"My poor fellow, you have indeed suffered; but I'll have you all right soon," said the Gold King, and placing Bugle Bill upon a stretcher made of two poles and a blanket, he and Indigo bore him up the mountain trail to his cabin.

With a skill that showed he understood surgery perfectly, Montebello dressed the wound in his head, which had been made by a bullet cutting its way along the scalp for a few inches, but doing no serious damage.

Then the broken leg was skillfully set, with the assistance of Indigo, and when the sufferer had been made easy, the Gold King asked quietly:

"Now, Bill, tell me how this happened?"

"You has heard of our finding poor Stranger Kit dead near his cabin, Mr. Montebello?"

"Yes, the boys were talking of it yesterday when I rode into town."

"Well, those as was with me did not go on to ther mines, as I did, but returned to ther camps."

"I worked some time in my lead, when I concluded to knock off and make a visit ter you, thet yer might tell me what were best ter be did with ther dockymints left by Kit, and which were directed ter some leddy in Santa Fé."

"I heard of this, and that Modoc Dan wished to take it upon himself to send the package, but the boys gave it to you to do, as you found Kit."

"Thet are so, Gold King; but I hain't used ter writin', so I was a-comin' ter you, and when walkin' along ther cliff trail, leadin' up from ther canyon, I seen a man's head dodge back ahind a rock; then come a shot in my face, and I knowed no more until I woke up in ther night."

"I had been hit well ter kill, only the ball glanced, and whoever shooted me jist throwed me over ther cliff for dead."

"Are you sure of this, Bill?"

"I be, though I remembers nothing more than finding myself lyin' thar with this wound and my leg broke."

"I groaned it out ontill day and then shouted; but it were Sunday, and none o' ther boys were in the hills, and by chance that gent heerd me, or I'd hev died, I guesses."

"Poor fellow! But what makes you think you were thrown over the cliff?"

"I hed Kit's papers in my pocket, when I were shooted, but they was gone when I comed to," was the earnest remark.

The Gold King seldom showed surprise, but now he started, and said quickly:

"That proves you were shot down that your assassin might secure those papers."

"Parson, you stay with Bugle Bill, while I go and take the trail of his assassin, and bring him back the papers."

"By the way, Bill, who was the envelope addressed to in Santa Fé, for the boys could not tell me?"

"To Miss Kate Kittredge, Gold King."

Quick as a flash the Gold King turned upon his heel, and the parson and Bugle Bill did not see his face turn deathly white, nor hear his muttered words:

"Good God! Kate Kittredge!"

Springing upon his horse, the Gold King rode down the mountain trail at a pace that few men would have dared risk their necks at.

His splendid horse, however, kept his feet well, and was soon dashing along the valley trail toward Gold Dust City.

There were those who saw the rapid ride of the Gold King, and noted his set face, that predicted trouble ahead for somebody, and they were not far wrong, for "The Magnificent," as many spoke of him, had a set purpose in view.

Reaching a part of the rambling town, or camp, where a small vale penetrated into the mountain range, running out into the main valley as a little brook might into a mighty river, the Gold King wheeled into it and sped on out of sight.

"What can the Gold King want up thar in ther Wolf's Den?" a miner asked of another, as The Magnificent sped by like the wind.

"Like as not some o' ther Wolf Gang hev gotten him riled and he are on ther war-path arter him; but he'd better go slow, brave as he be, when he goes in thar, fer ther whole pack will worry him," responded the other miner, and his words were based on facts, as the little valley into which the Gold King had gone was

the blackest spot among the Gold Dust City camps.

Its denizens were the "black sheep" of the flock that could boast few white ones, and they had herded together upon the principle of a fellow sympathy with each other, as well as for more thorough protection, and their deeds had won for them the name of the Gold Wolves, while their camp was commonly called the Wolf's Den.

This camp was up at the head of the vale spoken of, where it terminated in a canyon, and consisted of some score of stout cabins, all of which were occupied, containing from two to six men, according to their accommodations.

The better men of Gold Dust City had several times talked of wiping out this camp, feeling that there would be far less of crime and bloodshed in their midst should this be done, and yet so bold a front had the Gold Wolves presented that the effort to break up their lair had never been undertaken, and each year they had grown stronger and more reckless, until some sixty in number, they defied those who would interfere with them.

If any man broke the rude laws of Gold Dust City he was sure to seek and find refuge in the Wolf's Den, and there were men protected there who never dared leave the shelter of their camp, while others, though dwelling in the lair, were not disturbed and worked mines with the better class of miners.

One of these last referred to was Modoc Dan, who, though one of the acknowledged leaders of the Gold Wolves, was interested with several of the best miners in Gold Dust City in leads, had a share in the Nabob Saloon and another in a store known as the Curiosity Shop.

In fact, Modoc Dan was one of the leading spirits in Gold Dust City, and a man whom no one seemed anxious to pick a quarrel with, for he had made for himself a "record" in the camps as a man of desperate courage and a deadly foe.

As the Gold King dashed into the Wolf's Den his piercing eyes scanned the faces of those about him, and beholding a group before a cabin at the upper end of the canyon, he rode swiftly on and drew rein before them.

There were eight or ten men in the group, all of them desperate, wild-looking fellows, and they were listening to one of their number, who was talking in an earnest manner to them.

That one was Modoc Dan, or as he was called by his comrades in the Den, Major Modoc.

A tall, strongly-built, athletic fellow he was, with long black hair and beard, and eyes as blue as the sky.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings stuck in top-boots, and wore also a buckskin jacket over a blue flannel shirt, black scarf and a slouch hat, and about his waist was a belt containing three silver-mounted pistols and a bowie of rare pattern, the handle being handsomely carved.

All looked up with surprise when the Gold King dashed up and drew rein, for he seldom honored their camp with his presence, and there were those there who did not remember his last visit with any degree of pleasure, as he had come there then to get a bag of gold-dust which several of the gang had taken from an old sick miner, and got it too.

"Ho, Gold King, what's up?" cried Modoc Dan, and every eye was riveted upon the splendid horse, covered with foam, and his handsome rider, calm, stern and with a dangerous light in his black eyes.

Quick as a flash a revolver covered the heart of Modoc Dan, and in a voice that rung ominously the Gold King said:

"I have come, Major Modoc, for the papers you carry in your jacket pocket!"

"Hand them over, or I'll take them from your dead body!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE GOLD KING AND THE GOLD WOLVES.

MONTABELLO the Magnificent was one of those strange characters, that now and then fitted through frontier life, like a brilliant meteor across the heavens.

He had ridden into Gold Dust City one morning, coming from no one knew where, and his superb attire and appearance at once made him the target of abuse from certain bullies who held full sway in the camps.

He was prompt to act, and his action resulted in the death of his insulter and the backers of the bully being thrown out of the hotel, while the Gold King did not seem in the least ruffled by his encounter.

The next day The Magnificent had made inquiries of Colonel Cadaver, for he was located at the Paradise, of certain mines in and about Gold Dust, the result being that he found them all, some thirty different leads, being coolly worked by "squatters," who had disregarded the fact that they were known to have owners.

The Gold King calmly rode to each mine, showed his titles and gave the occupant twelve hours to vacate.

Some did, others did not, and a few of the latter wished that they had.

This gave The Magnificent a name, and when

he employed miners at handsome wages to work his mines, he soon became known as the Gold King.

Having gotten his mines going well and paying splendidly, the Gold King built his cabin on the hill, and one day a wagon train arrived with negroes, Indigo and Blue, and such luxuries in the way of furniture and stores as the Gold Dusters had never dreamt of seeing there.

With an open hand to all in distress, the friend of the weak, never seeking trouble, but if forced upon him being the last man to back down, the Gold King had become a kind of idol with many in the camps.

Did a miner get sick he cared for him, did one become broke he gave him a stake, did a bully go about hunting for a fight he was accommodated by the Gold King.

Wearing jewels that were worth a fortune, with a bowie, the hilt of which was solid gold, carrying revolvers heavily gold-mounted, and having his saddle and bridle studded with precious metal he was a temptation to all desperadoes to kill.

He also was known to go well provided with money, and the man who killed and robbed him was sure of a larger fortune than the mines would bring him in years, unless he struck an extraordinary lead.

Several times an investment of this kind had been made by some enterprising road-agent, but it turned out badly for him, while the Gold King had him buried at his expense.

Known to possess mines in other parts of the country, and which he was wont to go to alone, The Magnificent was supposed to be worth millions, and many wondered why he was content to dwell there in isolation, his life daily and nightly in peril, when he could live in the greatest luxury in the great metropolis if so he willed.

All knew, or felt that he had a history; but what that history was no one could find out, and large offers of gold to Indigo and Blue from the curious had failed to get anything from them.

Such was the man, as known to the denizens of Gold Dust City, who had boldly bearded the Wolves in their Den, and ridden up to Major Modoc with a revolver leveled at his heart.

The threatening words of the Gold King caused a decided sensation in that group of desperate men.

Every man's hand dropped instinctively upon the revolver at his hip, every man with one exception.

That exception was Major Modoc, and he dared not move.

The Gold King had so approached the party that he confronted them all, and not a man was there who dared make a motion to get to either one side or the other of him, for while he covered Major Modoc with one weapon, he held another cocked and ready, in the other, hand and all knew just what he was when armed, and how quickly he could drop several of their number, even though he himself fell under their fire.

The very boldness of his act paralyzed them, and for an instant it was a most thrilling tableau to gaze upon, to behold that one man daring Major Modoc and the half-dozen men about him, while within call were two-score more desperate characters, some of them even then hastening to the scene, for the coming of the Gold King had aroused the camp.

As for Modoc Dan, he stood like a statue, and his face was livid.

He tried to look into the blazing eyes that confronted him, but his own fell beneath the glance, and yet he felt that he must speak.

So he said sullenly:

"Gold King, hain't you made a mistake?"

"I have not, sir! Do as I bid you, or take the consequences!" was the stern response.

"What papers do you wish?"

"I wish those that you carry in your jacket pocket, and which, if I betray how you got them, will put the Vigilantes upon your track within the hour.

"I know all, Major Modoc, and if you do not give them up, I shall kill you and take them."

Major Modoc felt that he was trifling with death, and so he said:

"Is it quits between us, if I give them up?"

"Yes, until you do some other act that puts me upon your trail."

"Waal, I suppose I must give 'em up," and the man was about to thrust his hand into his breast pocket, when in thunder tones came the command:

"Hold! Up with your hands above your head, and none of that!"

Up went the hands, with a muttered curse, for Modoc Dan felt that he was foiled, as his pet revolver, always ready, he kept in one pocket of his jacket.

"Poker Saul, feel in the *right pocket* of Modoc's jacket, and take out some papers you find there!—the right pocket, I say, for you are a dead man if *you make any mistake!*" and the Gold King addressed a miner who stood next to Modoc Dan.

"I hain't going to fool in no man's pocket, Gold King," was the dogged reply.

"Do as I order you, sir, for I intend to have my way in this matter, and if harm befalls me

the Wolves in this Den will have the Vigilantes to settle with.

"Let somebody else do it," growled the man, Poker Saul.

"I told *you* to do it, and if you value your life you will obey, and quickly, too," was the cool response.

"Pards, are this squar' that one man, even if he are ther Gold King, sh'u'd bully our outfit?" cried Major Modoc.

"No!" came a chorus of voices, and the gang looked at the Gold King, expecting him to back down; but he smiled derisively and said:

"Men, you are playing with fire, and I warn you not to bring the Vigilantes upon you. I come here for certain papers which Major Modoc has, and if he is wise he will hand them over, and not force me to kill him, which I will do, ay, and any man who attempts to resist my getting them."

The boldness of the Gold King cowed the gang, and, as others began to arrive now upon the scene, the daring horseman spoke to his horse in a low tone, and the intelligent animal slowly backed up against the cabin, thereby preventing any one from getting behind his master.

This act convinced the miners that the Gold King had no thought of retreating, and Poker Saul said:

"If you gets ther papers, is that all yer ask, Gold King?"

"Yes, all now."

"And yer'll go?"

"Unless you feel yourselves aggrieved by my coming and wish to have it out with me," was the cool reply.

"It are no funeral o' mine, Gold King, for I don't know nothin' about ther papers, and you and Major Modoc for that; but I doesn't like to be bullied," said Poker Saul.

"Don't put up with it then," was the defiant response, and the men fairly started at the utter recklessness of the daring man, who continued:

"As you say, this quarrel is between Modoc and myself, and if you meddle, where it's man against man, you must bear the consequences.

"Come, sir, will you give me those papers from Modoc's pocket, or shall I kill him and take them myself?" and the dark eyes began to burn dangerously.

"What does yer say, Modoc?" asked Poker Saul.

"Give ther papers ter Gold King, Saul, and leave me ter settle with him at another time," threateningly said Major Modoc, and The Magnificent laughed, as though entirely disregarding the threat.

"I'll do it, major, for it's your funeral, not mine."

"It will be his funeral if I do not get the papers, and yours, Poker Saul, if you make a mistake in the pocket."

"Come, sir, do as I bid you, for I shall not wait longer!"

Poker Saul stepped up to Major Modoc, who stood with his hands above his head, and seemed about to thrust his hand into the pocket upon the left side, when he saw the revolver of the Gold King leveled at his head, and held in a grip that was as firm as iron, the finger touching the trigger.

Quickly he gave up his idea of drawing Modoc's revolver and risking a shot at the daring man, and placed his hand in the right pocket.

"Thar is no papers here," he said.

"Turn the pocket inside out, sir!" came the stern command.

"Oh, yes, thar is! I didn't feel 'em at first," and Poker Saul drew out a lot of papers along with a leather wallet.

"I want the large envelope and paper attached to it with a string, nothing else," said the Gold King, and returning the other to his commander's pocket, Poker Saul handed up those referred to.

"Put them in my saddle holster, sir, for it is not convenient just now for me to let go my revolver to take them," was the significant remark of the Gold King, and Poker Saul laughed, while he said:

"You is suspicious, Gold King."

"Yes, one never knows where the lightning is going to strike, Saul; but I thank you for your services, and if you feel insulted, *any of you*, by my coming into camp, you know where to find me.

"Good-evening," and with a word to his horse, the noble animal began to back away from the cabin and the group, the Gold King still holding the men covered with his revolvers, while upon his face rested a smile of perfect serenity, as though he was not in the deadly peril of his life.

CHAPTER V.

PLAYING A DOUBLE GAME.

"WHAT do it all mean, pard?"

This, with many more such questions, were addressed to Major Modoc as the Gold King rode slowly down the canyon and disappeared from the view of those watching him.

Major Modoc made no reply, but kept his eyes fixed upon the spot where the man who had so bullied him had disappeared.

"Pards, that man has got ter have a rope put about his neck," said one.

"Yas; and we must keep hol' of t'other end ready to pull when need be."

"He are ther wu'st we hev ever seen, fer he do not stand at anything."

"He are lightnin' unchained fer red work."

"He hev got ther narve o' a den o' coyotes."

These and many other remarks of a like nature went around the circle, which was now augmented by the coming of a score more men. All were a desperate lot, and yet they had seen one man ride into their midst and accomplish just what he had come there for.

Still stood Major Modoc in dead silence, his face a study for an artist who wished a character for Dante's Inferno.

He was as white as the bronze on his face permitted, his eyes were sunken, as though with a long spell of sickness, and he was as hard as stone in his look.

It was evident that he was losing ground with his followers.

This would never do. Their chief, for he was really nothing else, had been dethroned on his own ground by a man who was, after all, only a man.

All eyes were turned upon their leader, who had been made the victim of the Gold King's visit, and lowering brows showed the thoughts of the men as a body.

Major Modoc saw this, and he felt that he must retrieve himself.

He could do it in but one way, and when the questions were again repeated he answered, in a hoarse voice:

"Pards, I'll tell you just what it means."

"All right, Modoc, for it's the thing we want ter know, how our chief can be backed down by one man," said Gringo, a half-breed Mexican, and a terror in his way, who preferred a turmoil at any time to food.

He had not been there when the scene occurred, but had come up after the departure of the Gold King and had heard what had happened.

His looks showed that he was bent on mischief and, as Modoc did not speak at once, he called out:

"Come, Modoc, how come he ter back yer down with enough men at yer back ter eat him, and his horse with him?"

"Pards, them papers I held wasn't mine, and so I gave 'em up."

"That are no excuse, Modoc, for I has, you has, all of us has got sart'in things that hain't ours, but we is willin' ter fight for 'em, all ther same," put in Gringo, in an insulting way.

"Gringo, you're trying to drive me, I see. I am not to be driven, as you'll discover when I give the explanation," answered Modoc, threateningly.

"I means ter hear how it were that you backed down so cool, fer a man thet takes water, as ther boys say you did, hain't no fit leader fer ther Gold Wolves."

A murmur of assent greeted these words, and then Modoc spoke, for he saw that the feeling was against him.

"Men," he said, bluntly, and dropping wholly the dialect of the border which had seemed natural to him.

"Men, if I backed down, it was because I did not look upon the Gold King as a foe until his revolvers covered me.

"You know what he is, and that death is not surer to all of us some day than is the touch of his finger upon the trigger.

"He had the drop on me, and of course had his own way; but about me were half a dozen men who stood quietly by and saw him do as he liked, and I consider that they are to blame more than I was, for they were not his game."

"Yas, he looked every one o' us in ther face, and more, his irons seemed to cover me as much as you," cried one, in extenuation.

"Yas, and he had me covered."

"And me!"

"And I, too," cried the others, until Poker Saul said:

"Thet man hev a way of making his revolvers point whar he likes, and yer knows he hed me kivered."

"Well, you all may think so, but I was the real one he dealt with, and the papers I had were not mine, as I have said.

"The fact is, pards, those papers tell where there are certain gold mines in these parts, and rich paying ones, too, and I happened to get hold of them—how, it matters not—and intended to hold a meeting with you all to-night, and tell you just how we could make a fortune.

"With those papers we could hold the mines clear, and beyond dispute, and there would not, in a few months' time, be a poor man in this Den of Wolves.

"But the Gold King got the papers, and there is but one way to act now."

"And what are that?" asked Gringo.

"Get the mines anyhow!"

Modoc saw that he had made an impression upon the majority, and that he had turned the attention of all away from his having cowed before the Gold King, so he went on quickly to say:

"I don't care if the Gold King has got the papers, for there is one way in which I can get ther mines, and I intend to do it."

"How is that, major?" came in a chorus of voices.

"Never mind how, pards, but I intend to do it, and we'll all profit by it."

"Modoc, I believes you is tryin' ter cover up yer coward act, of backing down, by tellin' lies," boldly protested Gringo, and his hand was upon his revolver as he spoke.

Modoc made no move, for he saw that Gringo had the advantage of him, and after glancing at him with a smile of deep meaning, he turned and said:

"Well, Poker Saul is not considered a coward, Gringo, and he saw all that happened."

As he spoke he stepped back, so as to throw several of the crowd between himself and Gringo, and quickly drew his revolver when he again sprung out from cover and leveled at the man who had thrown insults in his teeth, and whom he now had at disadvantage.

Gringo made a bound behind the man nearest to him, while a shot from Modoc's pistol clipped his ear; but he too had time to draw, by this time, and the men falling hastily back out of range the two men were left to settle it among themselves.

And settle it they did, for, quick as flashes of lightning, several shots were fired; then came silence, and both men were seen lying prostrate upon the ground.

Gringo was gasping for breath, and Poker Saul said in his quaint way:

"Thet quarrel hev ended serenely; but how does you feel, Modoc?"

The answer of the wounded man was to beckon Poker Saul to bend over him, and he said something in a whisper to him.

What it was only Saul knew, and he called to several of those about him and said:

"Pards, Modoc have got it bad, so lift him up gentle and bring him up to his cabin on ther hill, and I'll look ter his hurts."

"Then, yer better take Gringo over yonder in ther sand and plant him, as he are no good on earth now."

"He are not dead yit," averred one.

"Waal, he will be, by ther time yer has got him to ther bone-yard."

With this Poker Saul had Modoc carried up to his cabin on the hillside, and, as it was getting dark, and the gang considered Gringo as good as dead, several of them bore him up the canyon to a spot already dotted with the graves of many who had departed this life "with their boots on."

They were anxious to get the work over before night, that they might adjourn to the saloons of Gold Dust City and talk over the affair with others.

A grave was quickly dug in the sand, and Gringo, now motionless, was thrown in, while to his boon companion, Breezy, was left the honor of throwing in the dirt, while the others sought more congenial occupations in the Gold Dust gambling and drinking saloons.

In the mean time Poker Saul had had Modoc borne to his cabin, and, being a surgeon—for medicine had been his profession until a poisoning case laid to his charge, had sent him flying to the border to escape justice—he said to those who had brought the wounded man from the field:

"Pards, I'll doctor the chief now and Benzine Bob will play nurse while ther lamp holds out ter burn, though it are my opinion Modoc hes ter hand in his chips."

The crowd then left, excepting Saul and Benzine Bob, and Modoc motioned to the former to approach.

"Wal, pard?" he asked, as he bent over him.

"Send Benzine Bob outside to wait."

"Benzine, will yer step down ter my shanty and git my surgical chist for me?" asked Poker Saul.

And Benzine Bob, a young man whose chiefest aim in life was to "punish" whisky, departed upon his errand, glad to have, in his own mind, an important mission to perform.

As he left the cabin Major Modoc said:

"Bolt that door."

It was done, and then, to the surprise of Poker Saul, the man arose to his feet and said, quickly:

"Saul, I got a glancing shot on my ribs, but it is only a flesh-wound and amounts to nothing, but dress it as quickly as you can."

"Wal, Modoc, you is playing some deep game, I guesses," remarked the surprised Saul.

"I am playing for those papers, and you and the others who are willing to aid me shall reap the reward."

"I'll be thar, pard, for digging fer scraps is gittin' monotonous to me."

"Listen to me, Saul, and do as I tell you in all things."

"I am dangerously wounded and expected to die, you know."

"You is a liar, Modoc."

"You do not understand me, Saul. I am supposed to be, and I am to be kept in that bed for weeks, and no one must be allowed to know to the contrary excepting Benzine Bob and some other man we can trust."

"Who will it be?"

"Toddy Tom."

"Yas; he's like Benzine; keep 'em both half

full and they'll sit in one place until they grow there."

"Well, I'll furnish the rum for them, and they are supposed to be my nurses, while you must be around constantly and give out that no one enters this cabin, and fix up a dummy in the bed to look like me."

"And you, pard?"

"I go at once on the trail."

"What trail?"

"The trail of those papers."

"I see; but how will you get out of camp?"

"I'll go up the mountain-side, and you can ride my horse, Raider, mind you, down the canyon to the Overland trail and hitch him in the Red Ravine for me, and I'll go there and get him."

"How long are this ter run on, pard?"

"Until I get well."

"I see."

"When I accomplish what I set out to do, I'll come back here, Saul, and make all known to you."

"Now, when Benzine Bob comes, send him at once for Toddy Tom, and then fix up this wound, and I'll tell the two rum-soakers just what I wish them to do."

Benzine Bob soon returned with the case of surgical instruments, and was at once dispatched to bring Toddy Tom.

In half an hour the two worthies arrived together at the cabin, and Major Modoc instilled into their rum-muddled brains just what he wished them to do, and then, while Benzine Bob took up his position on guard as nurse, Poker Saul mounted Raider and rode down the canyon.

"Is all clear without, Tom?" asked Major Modoc, from an inner room of the cabin.

"Yas, major, thar hain't a soul in sight."

"Good! now I'll be off," and any one who saw the individual who left the cabin, and turned abruptly up the mountain-side, would never have recognized beneath the disguise Major Modoc, the Chief of the Gold Wolves.

CHAPTER VI.

A PHANTOM ON THE TRAIL.

AFTER receiving the papers from Major Modoc, the Gold King rode slowly out of the canyon, but increased his pace to a gallop when he struck the trail leading to his home.

The shadows of night were gathering about him when he reached his cabin, and as Indigo came out to take his horse he asked after the welfare of Bugle Bill.

"He ar' doin' well as c'u'd be 'spected, massa," replied the negro.

"The parson is still here?"

"Oh yes, massa, and he done been singing psalms for Massa Bugle, and he do know how ter shout 'ligious music, sah; dat ar' a fact."

"Then you like him, Indigo?"

"Yas, sah, and so do Blue, and we wants ter go some time ter hearken unto his preachin'."

"You shall, Indigo," assured the Gold King, as he entered the cabin.

There he found Parson Pete entertaining Bugle Bill with stories of his experiences in preaching to the Gold Dusters, and Blue, the negress, was a most interested listener also.

"Ah, Bill, you and Parson Pete have become pards, I see, and I am glad of it, for I wish to leave you under his care for some little time," said the Gold King pleasantly, as he entered the room.

"Is yer going away, pard?" asked Bugle Bill.

"Yes, I thought of taking a short run over to my mines in Sunset City valley, and wished to ask Parson Pete to be your nurse until my return."

"Verily will I, my friend, for to serve you will be my pleasure," answered Parson Pete, earnestly.

"I wish I did not hev ter lay up here like a sick child, pard Gold King, fer thar is lots o' diggin' fer me ter do, and I hed expected ter finish up this year and git back with my leetle fortune ter ther old mother and sister who is waitin' fer me in Michigan. But here I is with a broke leg, and it'll be months afore I kin tramp round ag'in, I'm afeerd."

"Bill, it was not your fault that you are laid up, and never mind the loss of work on your mine, for I'll get a miner to dig for you on half shares, and you shall not lose anything, I assure you, while my home is yours as long as you care to remain, and while you are in need of a nurse the parson had better stop here and look after you; but are these the papers you had when shot?" and the Gold King handed over the papers which he had taken from Major Modoc.

"They is fer a fact, but how on 'arth did yer git 'em?" and Bugle Bill's face lighted up with delighted surprise.

"You are confident that these two, this envelope and this slip of paper, were all that you got from Stranger Kit?"

"Them was all, Gold King."

"I am glad to hear this."

"But whar did you git 'em?"

"From the man who took them from you," was the quiet reply.

"Ah! then you knows who he are?"

"I do."

"And will tell me?"

"Never mind now who he is, Bugle Bill, as—"

"I guesses I'll never make his acquaintance, Gold King, arter you has seen him," was the significant remark.

"Oh, yes, some day you will doubtless, for I did not kill him as you suppose; but tell me, Bugle Bill, are you willing to intrust these papers to my keeping?"

"I are for a fact, Gold King."

"And I may deliver them to the one to whom they are addressed?"

"Sure."

"Thank you, Bugle Bill, and I'll write you a receipt for them, so that you will not be responsible should aught arise that might cause trouble."

"I'll take yer word, Gold King."

"No; I prefer to give you a receipt, for life is uncertain with all of us, Bill."

And the Gold King hastily wrote a receipt, and Parson Pete attached his name as a witness.

Supper was then announced by Blue, and, in spite of his injuries, Bugle Bill seemed to enjoy the meal as much as the others, for the Gold King sent him a most generous supply from the table.

After supper Gold King had a long talk with Bugle Bill, and then made his preparations to depart on a night ride, and soon after mounted his horse and rode away from the cabin, taking a trail that led him into the mountains.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and the trail he followed needed light upon it, for it wound up the mountain, now bordering most dangerous streams that went surging by, and again being a mere shelf of rock upon the side of a precipice, where the slip of a hoof would hurl horse and rider hundreds of feet below.

The Gold King evidently knew the trail well, but, for some reason, the elegant black horse he rode seemed strangely nervous and several times his master spoke in a stern voice to him to urge him on.

"Why, Mephisto, you do not wish me to make you feel my spurs," said the Gold King, as the horse swerved away from the trail leading through a narrow canyon.

The animal did not seem to wish to enter the canyon and wheeled sharply to the rightabout when his master urged him on.

"What are you afraid of, old fellow?" said the Gold King, bringing him again to the entrance to the canyon.

But once more the horse refused to go forward, and the Gold King said soothingly:

"Ah! you remember the grave of Red Darrell up the canyon, whom I had to kill two months ago, and don't wish to pass it, fearing another shot from ambush."

"Come, old horse, don't be afraid, for you'll see no ghosts, and if we did, they'll not do us any harm."

And once again the Gold King urged Mephisto forward, to have him again wheel about and attempt to return down the trail.

Losing his patience, the Gold King reined the noble animal back sharply and at the same time touched his glossy flanks with the gold spurs he wore.

With an angry snort the horse then entered the canyon, his ears pricked forward and his attitude that of an animal who had a dread of some evil ahead.

"You scent danger, Mephisto, though I do not see who can threaten us here, unless it be Red Darrell's ghost," muttered the Gold King; but he was on his guard as he rode forward and his right hand rested upon his revolver.

The moon shone with almost the brightness of day, and every object was distinctly visible in the canyon.

Suddenly ahead, as the canyon widened slightly, a clump of cedars came in view, and the horse again snorted in fear, and seemed unwilling to go on, until once more urged by an angry word and the touch of the spur.

In urging on his horse the Gold King had not looked in advance of him for an instant, and once more doing so he suddenly came to a halt.

It certainly was no wonder that he did so, for in the edge of the group of cedars a grave was visible in the moonlight, while, standing at its head, erect and motionless as a tombstone, was what appeared to be a human form.

It was the form of a borderman, clad in buckskin, standing with one hand upraised as though warning the intruder back, and the other pointing down at the grave at his feet.

A tall form, a bearded face, and yet neither the man nor his clothing seemed real.

One glance at it, and there came from the lips of the Gold King:

"It is the ghost of Red Darrell, whom I killed and buried there, standing over his own grave; but, as I have never feared the living, the dead shall never turn me from my path."

"Come, Mephisto, on, sir!"

As the Gold King spoke, in a voice that had not the slightest tremor in it, he urged his horse forward.

But, quick as a flash of light, the animal, with a loud snort of fear, wheeled as though upon a

pivot, and started with a bound down the canyon.

With a drag upon the reins that caused the massive bit to throw the horse back upon his haunches, the Gold King checked the frightened animal, drove the spurs almost viciously into his flanks and wheeling him about forced him back toward the clump of cedars, while he muttered:

"I am no believer in the supernatural, but the conduct of my horse, and what I saw beyond all dispute, causes me to feel that after all, spirit forms may walk the earth.

"Ha! there is the grave, but the ghost has gone!" and the Gold King urged Mephisto up to a tree, fastened him securely and said:

"I will solve this mystery, if solved it can be."

Darting to the side of the grave of Red Darrell—a road-agent whom he had killed some time before, and had buried, so that there could be no doubt as to his having been slain—he found all quiet there.

The wind sighed mournfully through the cedars, the moon shone brightly down upon all, and the place looked weird in the strange light and solitude.

Penetrating the cedars, revolver in hand, the Gold King made a thorough search of them, though without making any discovery.

Returning to the grave, he bent over and narrowly regarded the ground about it.

"I see no trail, to cause me to believe it was a human being trying to frighten me.

"But no, it could not be that, as I distinctly saw Red Darrell as I beheld him that night, and often before. I could not be mistaken in that man.

"Bah! it was a hallucination, conjured up by the remembrance of that night when I shot him.

"But the behavior of Mephisto! I cannot account for that, unless he, too, remembered the scene where Red Darrell ambushed me.

"Well, I have no time now to tarry and go ghost-hunting, for I have work ahead of me."

So saying the Gold King mounted his horse and rode slowly on his way up the canyon, the animal still showing signs of nervousness.

After about a mile a shelf-like trail ran up the mountain-side, winding around the bold precipice wall as might a pair of stairs.

The Gold King knew the place well, and that for nearly a mile it was too narrow for two persons on horseback to pass each other, while in places it was most dangerous for even a horse without a rider to go.

Few men dared take that trail over the mountain range, preferring to go long miles around rather than attempt it.

But the Gold King was not one to hesitate at any danger, and though Mephisto again had to be urged by spur to ascend the trail, he went on his way.

"Why, old horse, you are afraid of your own shadow to-night," muttered The Magnificent, as Mephisto went along with ears pricked forward and breathing hard, as though he expected to behold another ghost.

A ride of half a mile brought the Gold King to the most dangerous part of the shelf-like trail, where it wound around the edge of the rocky wall, with not three feet of footing for his horse.

The moon shone against the precipice, however, revealing the path distinctly, and without hesitation the Gold King threw his right leg over his saddle-horn, so as to give his horse all the space possible, and urged him on to pass the narrow ledge.

Hardly had he gone half a dozen lengths along the perilous ledge, when the animal stopped with uncomfortable suddenness.

And no wonder was it that he did so, for there, directly in the path, standing in the same attitude of warning in which the Gold King had before seen him at the grave, was Red Darrell, the road-agent, or his ghost.

CHAPTER VII.

TRACKED.

As the weird apparition, so closely resembling Red Darrell, the dead road-agent, a second time appeared in his path, the Gold King could not restrain a slight shudder, for to be opposed by what certainly seemed to be the ghost of the man whom he had killed, was a shock even to his iron nerves and fearless nature.

An instant of this hesitancy, however, and the Gold King was as firm as a rock once more, and said in his cool way:

"Mephisto, we must see just what that is in our path, so hold firm, old fellow, for a false step here would send us both three hundred feet below to find bottom. Gently, old horse," and with this last soothing word to the trembling animal the Gold King slipped out of his saddle to the back of his horse.

Then he cautiously let himself down over the animal's haunches until his feet rested upon the ledge.

To pass the horse and get in front of him was now a most difficult feat, for there was not any space to spare, and a loss of equilibrium would hurl the man, perhaps horse and rider, to death.

By steadying himself well, and moving slow

and cautiously, the Gold King got by the hind legs of the animal and crouched beneath him.

A moment later and he had successfully gotten in front of him, and rising, pistol in hand, to confront the apparition, he saw that it had disappeared.

He knew that a hundred feet beyond the ledge turned an abrupt point, and then ran on for a quarter of a mile in full view.

With the moonlight as bright as day he could see the whole length he was well aware, and it was not possible for a human being to get out of sight in so short a time.

So, like the very wind, he sped to the bend and glanced around it.

Not an object met his sight, and so bright was the moonlight that he could have seen a crow had it been upon the ledge.

Like one turned into a statue the Gold King stood for full a minute.

He was evidently in a deep quandary, and a struggle was going on in his mind between the belief in the supernatural or not.

At last he walked slowly back to his horse and called to him to follow.

The obedient animal slowly came on after his master, and passing off of the ledge trail upon a plateau, the Gold King once more mounted and continued upon his way.

It was daylight when he came in sight of some mining-camps, known as Sunset City, and a place of abode of pretty much like character with Gold Dust City, its rival on the other side of the mountain range.

The camps were astir, smoke was curling upward from many a cabin, and the scent of boiling meats was wafted down the valley on the morning breeze.

Here, there, almost everywhere men in miners' dress were seen hastening to the nearest grog-shops for their "eye-opener," and, as their eyes fell upon the horseman they greeted him with a nod or wave of the hand, which he returned politely, for the Gold King had "interests" in and about Sunset City, and was a man well known there as one with whom it was dangerous to trifle.

Riding up to a cabin, hidden back in a mountain-cleft, the Gold King was greeted by a young miner who stood in the door with a cheerful:

"Hello, Gold King! I'm glad to see you, sir."

"And I am glad to find you, Lawless Luke, for I came here to see you, and it is important," answered Montebello.

"How can I serve you, sir?" the young miner asked, as he combed back his long brown hair from his high forehead, for he was making his toilet when the Gold King rode up.

"I will tell you, presently; but how are my mines going?"

"Paying well, sir, and I can show you the past month's digging in each lead, for you know that I keep a strict account."

"I know that, Luke; but I must put off looking over the books until next month when I come over."

"Now, I wish you to start upon a trip for me."

"I am ready, sir."

"All right. Rig yourself up for a month's journey, take money enough to see you through handsomely, for you may need plenty."

"When shall I start, sir?"

"The stage goes south to-day, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, at noon."

"All right, Luke, here are your written instructions, and you are to deliver these papers as addressed, and only to the one whose name is on the back.

"You are to know nothing, if asked, other than that you were told to deliver the papers, and if the one you give them to wishes an escort, to come to Gold Dust City, you are to serve as such."

"I understand, sir; but, you stop and have breakfast with me?"

"No, I will go on to the Goldbeam Hotel and put up, and you are to come there in ample time to take the stage, but when you see me there speak as though we had not before met to-day."

"I understand, Gold King," was the reply of the dashing, handsome young miner, and mounting his horse the Gold King rode away, turning out of the little cleft, where stood the cabin, into the broad valley trail leading through Sunset City.

As he turned into the trail a man reined his horse back out of sight behind a clump of trees, and waited for the Gold King to disappear down the valley.

Then he came slowly on, halted at the tracks of the Gold King's horse, where he had gone in and out of the ravine, and then rode up to the cabin of Lawless Luke, who was quietly eating his breakfast in solitary comfort.

"Ho, pard, is that camp in the valley Sunset City?" he called out.

Lawless Luke looked up and saw an old man, with gray hair and beard, dressed in buckskin and wearing spectacles.

He was, however, well armed and mounted, and might be anything from a wandering gold prospector to a trapper.

"That is Sunset, pard; won't you dismount and have some breakfast?"

"No, thank you, young fellow, for I'm making my way south, and was told I'd catch a stage from Sunset City."

"Yes, you can, old man. Go to the Goldbeam Inn, for it stops there," and Lawless Luke nodded as the old horseman thanked him and rode on his way.

For a stranger he seemed to show a remarkable knowledge of the camps, as he rode, without further inquiry, to a low place, half-grog shop, half-tavern, situated under the shadow of an overhanging cliff, and put his horse up, with a few instructions in a low tone to the red-faced landlord; then he proceeded on foot to the Goldbeam Inn, the pride of Sunset City, and a hostelry that would have been a disgrace to any other place, excepting Gold Dust City.

He ordered breakfast, however, and eyed the Gold King, who sat near him, in a way that would have made almost any other man uncomfortable; but The Magnificent did not appear even to notice him, and soon after arose and left the dining-room.

Then the old man knocked about the hotel for a couple of hours, when up dashed the south-bound stage, and having paid his passage-money, he stepped in and very quietly settled himself upon the back seat, drawing his slouch hat over his eyes, as though with the intention of going to sleep.

"All ready!" called out the driver, as he sprung to his box, and the landlord said:

"Hicks, draw up and hail Lawless Luke as you pass near his cabin, as he has engaged a seat for the run south."

"Ay, ay, Cap., all ready!" shouted the driver, and the stage-coach rolled away, leaving the Gold King gazing after it, as he sat upon the piazza enjoying a smoke.

Calling for his horse he mounted and rode off, halting at Lawless Luke's cabin and finding it locked.

"Well, he has gone, and I have done my duty, and Kate Kittredge will get her inheritance."

"Ah, me! what a flood of memories crowd upon me at the name of that girl—sad, bitter memories that will only die when my life shall end."

And the Gold King rode on his way, taking the same trail by which he had come to Sunset City, and saying as he did so:

"It will be night before I reach Red Darrell's grave, so that I will have a chance to see his ghost again."

"If I do, I have half a mind to try the effect of a bullet upon it."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGE PASSENGER.

"Ho, stranger, we are to be fellow-passengers, it seems," cried Lawless Luke, as the stage drew up at the ravine to let him get on, for he stood there awaiting its coming.

"So it seems, pard; and we have the old hearse all to ourselves, so we can take our comfort," was the answer.

"Yes, so we can; and I like comfort if I am a miner."

And Luke threw himself back in the seat by the side of the stranger, while the stage bowled along on its way.

When the coach stopped at the end of driver Hicks's run, the two men had become good friends, for each had found the other a very entertaining companion, and they were glad to see that the other coach was going down light, for no other passengers were on board.

"I say, Luke, who are the old party yer has been chinnin' with all day in ther huss?" asked Hicks, as the landlord of the tavern where the stage stopped called out:

"All aboard for ther south!"

"I don't know, Hicks, other than that he's a clever old man, who says he is prospecting for dust."

"No harm in him, you thinks?"

"Not a bit. Why?"

"Well, Dunlap carries out with him considerable dust, and he wants ter know who ther pilgrims is ther rides with him."

"He is right, Hicks; but the old man's all right, I am sure," and Lawless Luke went out to take his seat in the stage, where he found the subject of his conversation with the driver safely ensconced on the back seat.

Again the two entered into conversation, until night came on; they dropped to sleep, not to awaken until Dunlap shouted:

"Change husses! for I is at the end o' my run."

Transferred to another coach the two passengers settled themselves for another sleep, and only awoke at the next station where they were to make another change.

"There's dust in that mail bag, or I'm mistaken," announced the strange passenger, as the driver was putting a large bag safely away—the bag which Hicks had spoken of to Lawless Luke.

"Yes, it looks so, and it's lucky the road-agents don't know it, or it would soon go," answered Luke.

The road now ran through a most wild and picturesque region, and the driver on the box had to go at a slow pace, for there were dangers

upon all sides into which the slightest carelessness might bring them.

Tired of looking at the scenery, and seemingly indifferent to danger, Lawless Luke settled himself back for a nap, with the remark:

"Riding always rocks me to sleep, pard."

The old man made no reply, but gazed calmly out at the scenery for some time.

Then he turned and glanced at his companion.

The steady breathing of the young miner convinced him that he slept soundly, and the old man laid his hand gently upon his shoulder.

Instantly Lawless Luke started and said:

"Ah! I was dreaming that you were murdering me."

"Not so bad as that, I hope, my young friend; I but touched you that you might see that view."

"Is it not grand, and is not our way around this mountain perilous?"

"It is a splendid view, old pard, and this road needs a careful driver, that is certain; but I'm going to finish my nap," and Lawless Luke again sunk into a deep sleep.

For some time his fellow-passenger kept his gaze fixed out of the window, and then he bent it upon the sleeping man.

Cautiously he drew from his belt his long-bladed bowie, and holding it an instant above his head, as though to select the exact spot where he would strike, he drove it with all his force down into the heart of his unconscious victim.

A start, a groan, a quiver, and Lawless Luke sunk down upon the seat, as a second time the blade was sheathed in his broad breast.

Then the strange passenger tore open the buckskin jacket of his victim, and, after a short search, drew from an inner pocket a sealed packet.

"By Heaven! my knife passed through it," he said in a low tone; then he thrust the packet quickly into his own pocket, after which he leant out of the window and hailed the driver with:

"Pard, do you mind my getting on the box with you, for this young pilgrim does nothing but sleep and snore all the time?"

"No; I'll be glad o' yer comp'ny for a leetle while, though it's ag'in' the comp'ny's rules on ther south trail, fer any one ter occupy a seat with ther driver."

"Yer see ther trail is so awful dangersome, they don't want the driver's attention tuk up by talk; and ag'in, men as rides on this line hain't allus deacons, and a man on ther box has ter be on ther lookout that he doesn't git a wolf in sheep's clothin' alongside of him."

"But you has come clean through, you and ther young pilgrim, and t'other driver told me yer was all right," and the talkative Jehu went on talking about his coach, his team, the perils of the road and all else in a way that gave the man at his side no chance to say a word.

But grim, and quiet he sat there, his right hand by his side, as though he were watching a chance to act, and the unsuspecting driver held on his way until they reached a steep hill, and he took his whip to urge his team up the ascent.

Then suddenly there came a flash and report, and, as the stranger suddenly seized the reins, the driver fell heavily to the ground, a bullet in his brain.

As quickly as he could the strange passenger halted the team, sprung to the ground, and, unhitching one of the leaders, the best animal of the team, he dragged a large bag out of the boot, cut it open and took out a saddle and bridle which he had brought with him.

These were soon put upon the horse, and next came the leather mail-bag, which Hicks had told Lawless Luke contained gold.

This was rolled in a blanket and strapped upon the other leader, and, with a lariat as a lead-line for the second animal, the assassin turned to mount his horse, when he hesitated, drew a revolver and muttered:

"Yes, I had better do it for it may save rapid pursuit."

With this he fired four shots in rapid succession, and the four horses left in their harness, fell dead in their tracks.

Mounting quickly the bold man darted away in the heavy timber upon one side of the road, just as there was heard the clatter of hoofs coming down the trail toward the spot where the strange passenger had only too well accomplished his red work.

CHAPTER IX.

AMBUSHED.

SEVERAL days have passed since the tragedy on the southern trail, enacted by the strange passenger who had so well carried out his plot to kill the young miner and the stage-coach driver, and thereby become the possessor of the sealed packet of papers carried by the one, and the bag of gold given in charge of the other.

It is near the sunset hour, and the scene of my story has been transferred from the gold mines of Colorado to the picturesque land of New Mexico.

Upon the spur of a range of hills, in the shadow of some heavy timber, stands a man who looks almost like a hunted animal.

His attire is torn and soiled; his boots are worn; he has no hat, and his long hair is unkempt and tangled.

His face is haggard in the extreme, and his eyes have that wild glare which is seen only in one who has gone mad.

A belt is about his waist, and in it is but one weapon and that a single-barrel pistol.

For some minutes the man stands regarding the scene spread out before him, and the calm beauty of the outlook seems to have a soothing effect upon him; but only for a moment, as, starting suddenly, he cries:

"How dare I look at a scene so calm when my brain is on fire, my heart throbbing with the thought of my crimes, whose memories have driven me mad?"

"Ha! I hear hoof-strokes, and they come up the mountain trail, and I can have a chance to kill whoever comes, for I must have food, I must have gold, or I will die here in the mountains of starvation."

"With gold I can seek other scenes, far from here, and mayhap this madness may pass from me."

"But, I must kill now to get gold, and this is all I have to lay the foundation of a new fortune with."

As he spoke he drew the rusty pistol from his belt and looked at it tenderly.

Then he sprang back behind a tree as a horseman appeared in sight, coming along the rocky trail.

The horseman was none other than the strange passenger, the assassin of Lawless Luke and the driver.

He rode along with a wearied manner, and his horses seemed to have been driven hard.

As he approached the tree behind which the madman stood he plied the spur and urged the tired horse he bestrode into a gallop, the led animal following after with unwilling gait.

Only a short distance had they proceeded when there came a flash and report and, with a spring into the air, the horse with the rider went headlong to the earth, the man falling heavily and lying motionless as though dead.

A wild laugh burst from the lips of the madman as he sprang out from his place of ambush, and seizing the led horse by the lariat calmed him with a word.

Then again he broke forth:

"Ha! ha! ha! I have killed two birds with one stone, as we used to say when I was a boy."

"Horse and rider both! ha! ha! ha!"

"And here is gold! gold! gold!"

With lightning-like rapidity he searched the body of the fallen man.

"Ha! ha! not an old man, after all, for he wears false hair and beard; but he has gold, and that is what I wish; ay, and here are papers, too, sealed and addressed."

"But I must away from here at once."

And working with great haste, he soon had changed the saddle from the fallen horse to the living one, and throwing the leather bag aside unopened as worthless after the gold he had found upon his victim, he mounted and rode away, making the woods ring with his wild laughter of triumph.

"Ha! ha! ha! there sweeps down a black thunder-cloud and there is going to be a storm; but, what care I, for I have gold, and gold will buy food!"

"And darkness is coming on; but I fear not the blackness of night, now that I have gold."

And thus talking aloud to himself the madman rode on further and further into the timber that covered the mountain-spur, as though to hide himself from the storm that now was sweeping over the valley below with terrific fury.

With lurid lightning and deafening peals of thunder the storm came on, striking the mountain-spur with fury and adding its gloom to the darkness of nightfall.

Howling along, tearing limbs from stout trees, the tempest came, until the inky clouds, bursting against the mountain-side sent down a deluge of water.

With the fierce patter of the rain-drops into his face the stranger, who had lain as though dead where he had fallen at the shot of the madman, moved uneasily, and then, as though aroused from deep slumber he sprang to his feet.

"Great God! where am I? It seems to me that I heard a pistol-shot and— Ah! there lies my horse, and the other is gone!"

"What does it mean?"

Clapping his hands to his side he saw that his belt of arms was gone, and then, as he felt in his breast-pocket, a shriek of rage, such as the madman might have uttered in his fury, broke from his lips.

"Robbed! robbed! I have been ambushed, shot down and robbed! No, not shot down, for I remember now, my head struck a rock and stunned me, and this wound was made by no bullet," and he placed his hand to the side of his head where a deep gash had been cut by contact with a rock.

"The horse is dead, and the bullet sunk into his brain, and the accursed murderer behind me dead, too."

"Ah! there is my bag of gold! but what I

had about me, papers and all, are gone, and I would rather give a fortune than lose them."

"But, who has done this?" and, unheeding the storm raging about him, he stood gazing around, the glare of the lightning rendering the landscape as bright as day, and revealing his face, no longer hidden under a gray beard and wig, as that of Major Modoc, the chief of the Gold Wolves.

At length the fury of the tempest drove him to the shelter of some rocks near at hand, and there he crouched, drenched to the skin, his head aching, his brain and heart on fire with rage, through the long hours of the night.

With the coming of the dawn he glanced about him.

There lay his dead horse, and near the leather bag of gold; but his other animal, saddle, bridle, belt of arms, and, most of all, the papers he so treasured, were gone.

And where?

He could not tell, for the tempest had swept away every trace of a trail, even to his experienced eye.

"Oh! but my vengeance shall fall for this?" he cried savagely.

"It is the Gold King, whom I believed I had out-plotted for once, who has tracked me and done this, and he has the papers!"

"But, I will at once seek the girl and know all, and, woe be unto Montebello the Magnificent, for no wolf on his track could be fiercer and more merciless than I will be!" and gritting his teeth savagely, he threw the gold bag across his shoulder and started at a quick pace down the mountain trail, his face as tempestuous in its expressions as the face of Nature had been the night before, when the storm had swept over it.

A walk of a score of miles brought him, toward evening, in sight of a town, one of those quaint, old-time villages found in New Mexico, though now not as lawless as in those days, ere the march of American civilization had brought order out of a chaos of crime.

Waiting until the shadows of night fell, Major Modoc then went on his way and entered the town, at once directing his steps toward an inn, where he found an abiding place to suit him, to judge from his muttered words:

"This place will do. Gold will buy the landlord, and from here I go forth to fortune or death."

CHAPTER X.

THE LIGHTNING'S STROKE.

IT was the morning after the storm which had swept through the mountains, and thus wiped out every trace of the trail left by the madman who had robbed Major Modoc of the sealed packet of papers which he seemed to prize so highly, and had become an assassin to get hold of.

Along a mountain trail, several leagues from the New Mexican town where Major Modoc had found shelter after his misfortunes, a young girl was dashing swiftly along upon a spirited mustang, her eyes drinking in the grand view spread out before her vision, and stretching for miles away over hill, valley and canyon.

She was well mounted, sat in her saddle with the grace of a Mexican and the freedom of a perfect horsewoman.

Her bridle was heavily studded with silver, the huge Mexican curb and bit being solid; the saddle was also ornamented with the same precious metal, while panther, wild-cat and fawn skins formed the housing and flaps.

A lariat hung over the right horn, which was, like a man's saddle-horn, fully ten inches in diameter and trimmed with silver.

A holster also was in the saddle, within easy reach of her right hand, and in it was a gold-mounted revolver.

The maiden was very beautiful, with a rich, darkly-bronzed complexion, black hair, long, sweeping eyelashes and eyes that were full of luster, large and passionate.

Young, beautiful, wearing the flush of perfect health, one would have thought that the face would be happy in expression; but such was not the case, for a look of deep sadness rested upon it, and her thoughts seemed to be in the far past.

As she reached the ridge she allowed her horse to dash along swiftly until the animal suddenly halted, while ahead was discovered a pack of hungry wolves about the body of a horse.

Making a detour to avoid passing near, the maiden went along at a slower pace, and soon her horse once more halted.

Again she saw before her a dead horse; but it was not, as was the other animal, stripped of saddle and bridle, for these were still upon him.

Nor was he alone in death, for a rider lay near.

The trail wound along the side of the cliff, and the maiden had no alternative but to pass near, so she urged her mustang forward with the whip, and, snorting and alarmed, he continued on his way until he approached the body of the dead man.

"Poor fellow! It is the madman that visited the ranch the other day, and whom the towns-

people were hunting for a murder he had committed.

"Ha! he has been struck by lightning during the storm last night, and he and his horse both killed, for these two trees, between which he had to pass are riven to atoms.

"And he grasps some papers in his dead hand!

"I must see what they are, for they may be of value," and springing from her saddle she started toward the dead madman, after throwing the rein of her bridle over the limb of a tree.

"I will send some of the men from the ranch to bury him," she muttered, as she approached the prostrate form.

Bending over him, with a certain awe and respect for the dead, she lightly grasped the papers in the closed hand.

They were grasped too firmly to be easily withdrawn, and she used force.

Still the dead hand would not give them up.

"Something bids me get them at any hazard; but how?" she said with a perplexed look upon her face.

A moment she stood in silence, and then started as she said quickly:

"My knife will cause the stiffened hand to yield them up."

She drew from her belt a small hunting-knife and tenderly cut the tendons of the hand, and as she did so her eyes fell upon a bag of gold clutched in the other hand of the madman.

Her eyes sparkled and her voice trembled as she said:

"It is gold! and just what I have prayed to possess, that I might fly far from here.

"It is no fortune that the bag contains, but it will be sufficient for me until I can perhaps find my father, if he is yet alive, which Heaven grant that he may be!"

Forgetting the papers she grasped the gold.

It was the gold which Major Modoc brought with him, added to what he had robbed Luke Lawless and the stage-driver of.

Eagerly she seized the bag and hastily ran over the amount, while she said in an excited way:

"This is indeed a small fortune to me, and Heaven seems to have guided me in my ride to-day by a trail I seldom come.

"But, to whom does this gold belong? Not to this poor madman, certainly, for he had nothing.

"Ah! that dead horse down the trail tells the story, with the madman mounted upon this one. He killed and robbed some poor unfortunate.

"But, I forget the papers," and she drew them gently from the now loosened fingers, to start to her feet with almost a shriek, as her eyes fell upon what was written upon the sealed package.

"Kate Kittredge," she said, in a voice that quivered; and for a long time she stood like a statue, white and trembling.

Then she suddenly thrust the package into the bosom of her dress, seized the bag of gold, and, a moment after, was urging her horse at full speed along the trail she had come, while she muttered as she sped along:

"How strange is all this! that the lightning stroke should have given into my hands that which was intended for me!

"What does this sealed envelope contain?

"What secret am I to learn?

"Soon I shall know all, and, maybe, I shall be saved from the fate intended for me, for my father has sent me this letter, I know."

CHAPTER XI.

THE FATAL LETTER.

AFTER a hard ride of several leagues the maiden drew her panting pony up at the gate of a grand old hacienda.

Around it the lands were covered with cattle and mustangs; a few mounted cowboys here there were visible, watching them; and within the adobe walls of the grounds about the hacienda was every appearance of thrift and comfort.

A stone chapel was in a clump of trees near the abode, and half a dozen adobe huts for the servants of the estate were hidden away in a clump of timber.

The hacienda was large, rambling and luxuriously furnished, yet about all, from the wide halls to the stately library, there was an air of gloom.

A portero opened the gate and bowed politely, as the maiden rode up, and a servant took her horse as she sprung from her saddle before the main door.

Entering the hacienda, her bag of gold hidden in the folds of her riding-dress, she called to an upper servant and said:

"Gomez, send several men to the hills where are the ruins of the old Comanche camps and have them bury the body of a man they will find there."

"Yes, sefiorita; but, has the sefiorita been attacked, and forced to take human life, for I noticed, as she came into the gate, that she had ridden her horse hard, and she says there is a body to bury?" said the old servant.

"No, but I found there in the hills, the poor madman, who visited this ranch some days ago. He was struck by lightning in the storm last night and lies unburied, so see that he is not left

to become food for the wolves, good Gomez," and the maiden passed on into a wing of the house where were her own rooms.

The windows overlooked a lovely garden, large, full of the choicest plants and most fragrant flowers, and with arbors here and there inviting repose, for hammocks, or easy-chairs were in each.

The rooms she entered were two in number, and connected by a large door.

One was a sleeping-room, the other a cosy library, sitting-room and boudoir combined, and it seemed like a fairy retreat.

Standing by the window, her riding-habit drawn about her, the maiden gazed out upon the scene and her eyes fell upon several forms in the garb of nuns.

They were walking to and fro, beneath the shade of the trees, and as she looked at them she murmured:

"They are kind to me, and yet I feel that they are nothing more than my jailers, while Father Fanchon watches me constantly as though he suspected that I intended to fly away.

"This is indeed a beautiful home, and every luxury is mine; but I feel that it is no more than a gilded cage to me, and I long to fly away; but I have been powerless to do so.

"Oh! that I was not left here, as it were in security, in pawn, for debt, and could be my own mistress!

"And the time draws near for my father's return, when it will be either my sacrifice, or my freedom, for, if he brings not gold, I must become the wife of the man to whom all this grandeur belongs, and, in my inmost soul I hate Don Diaz Murillo!

"Yet within a short time, if my father does not return, I must become the wife of Don Diaz; if my father returns unsuccessful, a poor man, unable to pay the debt due the Don, I still must be sacrificed.

"Ah me! sad indeed is my lot," and she sunk into a chair, to suddenly utter a cry, as she thought of the letter she had concealed in her bosom.

Quickly she drew it forth, and locking the doors leading to her room, threw herself down upon a divan to see what that package contained.

With trembling hands she broke the seal and took out the papers the envelope held.

There were two, one a large envelope, also sealed, and then two pieces of paper.

The envelope she glanced at first and cried:

"My father addressed this, and his seal is upon it.

"But the other envelope was addressed in a different hand, and yet it had a familiar look.

"Let me see the seal."

She took up the outer envelope as she spoke, and saw that upon the red wax was imprinted a crown.

Then she took up one of the slips of paper the larger envelope had inclosed, and read aloud:

"I send within, to Miss Kittredge, an envelope addressed to her, and accompanying it a few words written by the one who sends to her the sealed package.

"The words explain all, and I may say that the Ill-Omen Mine will be faithfully kept for the coming of Miss Kittredge, or whoever she may send in her behalf."

There was no signature to this, and Kate Kittredge took up the slip of paper upon which with his own blood Stranger Kit had written his last words.

A glance at the lines written there and the maiden uttered a low moan and swooned away, sinking down upon the floor.

For a long time she lay thus, but at last returned slowly to consciousness, and realizing all as she beheld the fatal letters, she burst into tears, while she cried over and over again:

"My poor father! he is dead! Alas! alas!"

Becoming more calm after awhile, she read the dying words, and then, with a look of firm resolve, broke the seal of the envelope which her father had addressed to her.

Its contents were a legal-looking paper, which she saw was the title to the Ill-Omen Mine.

Then there were two small maps, one of the Ill-Omen Mine vicinity, and another of some other locality.

A third paper was as follows, and the maiden read it with an aching heart:

"ILL OMEN MINE.

"MY DARLING CHILD:—Here, in the solitude of my cabin, when night comes on, I sit and think of you, and wonder if we shall ever meet again in this world.

"A few short years ago life seemed only joy to me, for then your mother was living, and I had all to make me happy.

"But misfortune came, as you know; my riches were swept from me by a villain in whom I trusted; your mother died, and with you, my child, I became a wanderer.

"Meeting Don Diaz he became my friend, I believed for my own sake; but it was because he loved you.

"He got me into his power by loans, and I was forced to either allow him to wed you, or gain time with the promise to do so in the end, if I did not pay him within a given time.

"You remember the compromise we entered

upon, that I was to come to the gold mines to seek my fortune, leaving you, as a hostage, at the Convent Hacienda of his brother, Padre Fanchon.

"There you were to remain, with every luxury your own, for two years, and he was to visit you once each month.

"If within that time I did not return, or if I met death, then you were to become his bride.

"I agreed to this, my child, knowing that you would at least have a good home until I could find you one, and believing that I could do so.

"I knew well that you loved another, but yet could not marry that other as an impassable barrier is between you; but I hoped that I might steal you away from Don Diaz, once I struck it rich in the mining country.

"Arriving here I struck a good lead, in a mine that is said to be haunted, and is known as the Ill-Omen Mine.

"More: I found another lead elsewhere, a map of which I send with this letter, that will pan out well.

"Here I could not bring you, for oh! it is so wild, so fearful here among these people, some of whom hardly seem human.

"I keep to myself, having nothing to do with any one, if I except a good young fellow they call Bugle Bill, with whom I have had a few friendly talks.

"They call me here Stranger Kit, and that is the only name I am known by.

"I hope to be able to come to see you before our time of probation is ended, pay the Don his debt, and release you from the position you now occupy.

"I will put men at work in my mines, and live with you in the nearest town to our interests.

"There is one man here whom I hear much of, though I have not seen him except at a distance.

"To him I thought of going, telling him how I was placed, and ask him to buy one of my mines so that I might pay Don Diaz and take you out of your gilded misery.

"His name I do not know, other than that men call him Montebello the Magnificent, and the Gold King.

"Some day I will see him; but I write you now that you may understand fully how we both are situated, and that you may know I shall do all I can to take you away from the Hacienda.

"I have no doubt but that Padre Fanchon and the Sisters are good to you; but then, you are really in jail, as it were; to get you away from Don Diaz I would have to resort to strategy, for he would not give you up under any consideration, I well know.

"I intend sending this by some faithful messenger, as soon as I can, and I wish you to post yourself fully regarding all chances of leaving the Hacienda, should I have to spirit you away. So, write me to the address I give, mailing the letter yourself, when you ride out, for the Don said that he would not restrain your liberty.

"Should aught happen to me you will receive this letter and know all, and my wish is that you will take possession of these mines, and they will bring you a fortune which will enable you to free yourself from Don Diaz.

"Should men come to you as my friends, believe them not, and take only these lines, these maps as your guide.

"This letter and these maps I now seal and address to you, and Heaven grant that they reach you in safety.

"God preserve you, my child, and give you strength to bear all that life may bring to you of sorrow, if sorrow it must be.

"Ever your devoted father,

"CARL KITTREDGE."

Down went the beautiful face into the trembling hands, as Kate Kittredge read the last lines, for the slip of paper, the last words written by Carl Kittredge, told her that her father was dead.

"Dead! dead! and not one word as to who his murderer was!

"But I shall know, and my poor father shall be avenged!

"Heaven forgive me if I wrong him; but may it not have been the act of Don Diaz?"

She started as she spoke, for a knock came upon the door, and hastily hiding her letters and drying her eyes she went to open it.

It was a pious Sister, and she said in her soft, plaintive way:

"Don Diaz is here to see you, my child."

CHAPTER XII.

DON DIAZ, THE RANCHERO.

SHORTLY after the maiden, Kate Kittredge, entered the Hacienda gates, there rode up a man of striking appearance, attended by several others.

He was a Mexican, evidently, for that nationality was stamped upon his face indelibly; but he was taller than his race, possessed a sinewy form, and was dressed with extravagant richness, his broad sombrero being exquisitely embroidered on one side with an eagle and serpent in gold thread, the eyes of the former being diamonds, and those of the latter rubies.

He was fully armed, with gold-mounted bowie and revolvers, and his attendants were also equipped for war, and well mounted.

The face of the caballero was a study.

At first it was winning in expression; but a closer look showed heartlessness and even cruelty.

He was politely saluted by the portero at the gate, and without returning the salute asked:

"Did not the Sefiorita Kate ride in a short while since?"

"Yes, sefior."

"I thought I saw her do so," he muttered, and then he rode on to the Hacienda and dismounting, threw his rein to one of his four attendants.

"Ah! my brother, I am glad to welcome you," said a padre, who just then came forward.

There was a striking resemblance between the two men, though one wore the garb of a priest.

They were brothers; the one rich and worldly, with half a score of ranches, cattle by the thousands, and an elegant home in Santa Fé.

The other the recipient of his brother's bounty, who had, with their two sisters, come to the Hacienda to dwell, the latter having become religious recluses.

Don Diaz, the rich brother, had given them the Hacienda for their home, and here the three, the Padre Fanchon, Sister Terese and Sister Serene, lived a quiet life of luxury, doing whatever good came in their way, though not going outside to look up opportunities for so doing.

In the keeping of the three the maiden, Kate Kittredge, had been left by her father, when he had gone forth, driven by poverty and a debt that kept him down, to seek a fortune in the gold mines, that he might cancel his indebtedness to a man who demanded more than the "pound of flesh" if it was not paid within a given time, for his demand was nothing less than the fair hand of Kate Kittredge in marriage.

Where Don Diaz got his vast wealth no one knew.

He had come to the region where he made his home, the possessor of a large fortune, his brother being then in a monastery there, and his sisters in a convent.

He had purchased several ranches, a superb house in the town, and the elegant hacienda estate upon which he had placed his brother and sisters, building the latter a chapel, where he held mass for the benefit of the surrounding people and those connected with the property of the Don.

Where the Don and Carl Kittredge had met before neither ever told any one; but the latter had been working in the mines when one day he came face to face with Diaz Murillo.

The recognition was mutual, it seemed, and each man dropped his hand upon his revolver, and thus they had stood, the few spectators to the scene expecting to witness a tragedy.

But suddenly the Don threw up his hands, without word or comment, and Carl Kittredge replaced his revolver in his belt.

The next moment the two men walked off together, and three days after Carl Kittredge was the manager of the Don's estates.

Some months passed away and there appeared upon the scene Kate Kittredge, the beautiful daughter of the one-time miner.

She won hearts at sight, and beaux flocked to her father's home in the edge of town; but though scores offered their love, along with their hands, and others their fortunes too, Kate Kittredge accepted none, and rumor had it that Don Diaz would be the successful suitor.

Then a change came, for Carl Kittredge left the home where he had lived in seeming happiness and comfort, and the Señorita Kate, as she was known to the people, suddenly disappeared, and it was rumored soon after that she was residing at the Chapel Hacienda of Padre Fanchon.

For a long time no word came from the absent miner, and then a short letter was received by Kate telling her that her father had hopes of good fortune.

The pledge that he had made to Don Diaz, of his daughter's hand, in case he should not return within a given time, the reader already knows, and possessed of the knowledge that the one whom she so dearly loved, and who had been her only protector, was dead, it was indeed a bitter moment for the young girl to feel that the Don might also know what had happened, and have come to demand that she become his wife.

"I will see Don Diaz in a few moments," she said to the servant who had brought her word of his presence at the Hacienda, and she hastily made her toilet, replacing her riding-habit with a handsome dress of soft black material and erasing from her face the trace of tears.

Sweeping into the library she found the Don impatiently pacing to and fro; but at her coming his face lighted up with a smile, and he bent low in salutation while he said:

"I hope I find the Señorita Kate enjoying perfect health?"

"Yes, Don Diaz, I am in the enjoyment of the best of health," was the somewhat cold response.

"And did you enjoy your ride?"

The Don then knew that she had been out riding, she saw; but did he know more, she wondered?

"Yes; I always enjoy a gallop on horseback," she answered.

"You ride at a swift pace, señorita."

"You saw me then, señor?"

"Yes, in the distance only, for I could not overtake you; but have you aught to tell me, or any wish that I can grant, señorita?"

"No, thank you, Don Diaz; but have you word of my father?"

Kate made the venture, for she believed that it was to tell her of her father that he had come.

"No, señorita; I have heard nothing of your father, and the time is drawing near when I should do so."

Kate gave a sigh of relief, for she saw that the man was not deceiving her.

Then she said quickly:

"I have some news, señor, and it has unnerved me, as you may see."

"I observed that you were very pale, señorita, and your manner nervous; pray tell me the cause."

"When out riding this morning in the Comanche Hills—"

"Ah! do you go that far from the Hacienda, señorita?" quickly asked the Don.

"I do now and then, señor, carried away with the enjoyment of my ride."

"It is dangerous, most dangerous, for there are small bands of Indians about, not to speak of road-agents, and you would prove a rich prize for any of them."

"I gave orders that you were not to go more than a mile from the Hacienda."

"I am not one of your servants, Don Diaz, to obey your orders, nor will I be trammelled by having a servant as an escort."

"If it is dangerous I will not go so far; but I have a fleet horse, as you know, and am armed, so felt no fear," was the haughty reply.

"Yet it seems that you were alarmed from some cause this morning, and ventured miles from the ranch?"

"Yes; yet I met no living being, but came upon the body of a dead man and his horse, and their attitude showed that they had been struck by lightning, for they lay between two shattered trees."

"Ah! did you know the man?"

"He was a poor madman who came to the Hacienda some days ago."

"Ha! the same that the Vigilantes were looking for, as he had committed some crimes in the vicinity of the town?"

"I ordered Gomez to send some of the vaqueros to bury him, as I did not wish to leave his body to the coyotes; but will you not join Padre Fanchon and your sisters in the garden?"

Don Diaz saw that the maiden did not wish to be alone with him, and he bit his lips vexatiously, but said:

"Yes, we will go to the garden; but let me now say, señorita, that I do not wish you to go out of sight of the Hacienda in your rides, and also beg you to remember, if your father does not return within a few months, I shall claim the payment of his debt with your hand."

"I understand well the terms, señor, by which my father sold me to you, and you need not remind me of the dates, for they are engraven upon my brain."

"I was in hopes that you would say your heart."

"No, for it would be untrue, as I have no heart for you to win, Don Diaz," and the maiden led the way out into the garden, where Padre Fanchon and his sisters were enjoying a chat beneath a grove of trees.

There was a strange likeness between the two brothers, except that the calling of the padre had toned down the flashing eyes and reckless look that dwelt upon the face of the Don; but they were twins and a most remarkable resemblance existed between them.

The sisters, too, were twins, and while resembling each other in a marked degree, possessed also the same strong and handsome features of their brothers.

Altogether they were a remarkable-looking quartette, yet they would inspire admiration allied to fear, rather than love.

It was a great relief to poor Kate when, after a late supper, Don Diaz took his departure, for he never remained all night at the Convent Hacienda.

She had been forced to keep up through all, hiding her deep grief, and at the same time fearful that he might know of her father's death.

At last, however, he took his leave, saying that he would come again in a week or so, and Kate Kittredge sought her room, and throwing herself upon her bed burst into tears, while after a while she said earnestly:

"Never will I wed that man, for death has canceled the debt my father owed him, and I will fly far from here, far from this hated spot."

CHAPTER XIII.

A SENSATION IN GOLD DUST CITY.

THERE were ugly rumors floating around the camps of Gold Dust City, and the absence of the Gold King added to them.

It was said that he had shot down Modoc Dan the chief of the Gold Wolves, and Gringo, one of the band, he had killed.

Bugle Bill was also missing, and known to have had the important papers, left by Stranger Kit, his disappearance was looked upon as most mysterious, and somehow it was hinted that the Gold King was at the bottom of it.

Parson Pete also had not been seen, and he had been last heard of as being with The Magnificent.

Something was wrong evidently, and the rumors, starting from no one knew where, continued to gain ground, and more, were added to, until a clear case of murder seemed to be made out against the Gold King.

Mounting his horse, as the rumors grew deeper, and the talk of the miners more threatening, Colonel Cadaver, the stern-faced landlord of the Paradise, rode over to the camp of the Gold Wolves, determined to solve the mystery for himself, for he had always liked Montebello and greatly admired him.

He traced the rumors as coming from the Gold Wolves, and felt that some devilry was being hatched against the Miner King.

The colonel was well known in the retreat of the Gold Wolves, and he was also known to be a man not to trifle with, so no one barred his way as he rode up to the cabin of Major Modoc.

The door was half-open, and Toddy Tom was seated on a bench near by, smoking his pipe, and about half-full, a condition that was delightful to him.

"Ho, colonel, glad ter see yer; but yer can't see ther major," said Toddy Tom in a drunken kind of way.

"How is Modoc, Tom?"

"Very bad, pard colonel, very bad."

"He is wounded I believe?"

"Waal now yer'd think so, ef yer seen him."

"I have had some experience with surgery, so allow me to see him."

"No, colonel, orders is ag'in' it."

"Whose orders?"

"Poker Saul says so."

"Where is Saul?" and the colonel looked about the camps, as he still sat upon his horse.

"He are about."

"And are you Modoc's nurse?"

"I be."

"Who else?"

"Benzine Bob."

"I don't wonder that the man is badly off," muttered Colonel Cadaver, and then he asked:

"Who shot Modoc?"

"The Gold King," was the calm lie told.

"When?"

"Sunday arternoon."

"Why did he shoot him?"

"Dunno! he jist rid up here ter take ther camp, shooted Major Modoc afore he c'u'd draw, and kilt Gringo."

"And yet got away, when there were scores of you about?"

"Thet are his way of doing."

"And where is the Gold King now?"

"Run off."

"Why?"

"He know'd we'd be arter him; and he hev kilt Bugle Bill, too."

"Who says so?"

"My pards."

"I do not believe it."

"I does; and that hain't all."

"Well?"

"I guesses he hev kilt ther Parson, too."

"Toddy Tom?"

"Yas, colonel."

"You had better keep your tongue between you lips, for, you mark my words, the Gold King has not run off, and he'll be back here."

"He better not come, ef he knows what are good for him."

"You cannot frighten him by threats, Tom, and he will come, I tell you, when you least expect."

"He has been gone a week at a time before, and it is just a week to-day since he left me, so don't fool yourself with the idea that you have scared him away from Gold Dust City."

"The gang has scared him," meekly said Toddy Tom.

"You mean your Gold Wolves?"

"Yas."

"Don't you believe it, Tom."

"Waal, he better stay off ef he knows what are good for him, for thar is men in this gang as intends ter jump him at sight, and don't you fool yerself, colonel, thet they hain't."

"Well, Tom, I hope I'll be there to see them do it; but here is a flask of brandy I brought for Modoc, thinking he might need it when I heard he was lying very low."

And Toddy Tom grasped the outstretched flask with alacrity.

"It is not for you to drink, Tom."

"Oh, colonel."

"Bad rum is good enough for you, so give this faithfully to Modoc."

"Every drop o' it, colonel."

"And tell Poker Saul he had best not make any break against Gold King."

"It ain't Poker Saul as is rushin' it ag'in' ther King."

"Who is it then?"

"It are Cruel Knife Kit."

"Ah! then he better look out, for Gold King loses no love on him since he saw him use his knife on that poor consumptive miner, who would not have lived much longer had he let him alone."

"Oh, Cruel Kit don't mind who he knifes, pard colonel, and he says as how he'll dig his blade inter ther Gold King ef he comes back and ther boys don't hang him."

"Cruel Knife's a bad man, colonel."

"He's a desperado, yes, and his great strength makes him a bully, along with his skill in handling a knife; but I venture money on it, Toddy Tom, that if he meets Gold King he'll find his match."

"I'll take yer bet, Colonel Cadaver, so name yer sum," said Poker Saul, stepping out of the cabin.

"Ah, Saul, is that you?"

"Yes, colonel, and on the bet, so what are yer figgers?"

"I did not know that you were in the cabin, Saul, and I rode over to see what all this talk was about the Gold King, and to see if I could do anything for Modoc."

"Modoc's mighty low, and chances are ag'in' him; but I may fetch him round all right; but ther King put him whar he are, and Gringo lies up the canyon toes up underground, and ther are Montebello's work, not ter speak of more, so ther boys is going to settle with him if he dares ter show face in Gold Dust ag'in."

"He'll return, Saul, and I was just saying to Toddy Tom I'd bet Cruel Knife Kit would meet his match if he attacked Gold King."

"Well, he'll attack him, sart'in, if Gold King turns up, which I doubts, and my money are on Cruel Knife."

"How much?"

"Say five hundred dollars, colonel."

"Enough."

"Let Toddy Tom hold stakes."

"No, for I don't wish to be robbed."

"My word is good for it, and if you lose and don't pay, then I'll make you," was the cool reply.

"Done, colonel; call it a thousand then on them terms?"

"So be it, and now I'll be off; but if I can serve Modoc with anything to eat from my table send for it," and Colonel Cadaver rode away from the cabin and out of the canyon retreat of the Gold Wolves.

Dark glances were cast at him, by the gang, who wondered why he had come there; but he was a popular man, ever ready to help the under dog in a fight, and aid one who was sick, wounded or in distress, and the miners wished no quarrel with him.

Taking the mountain trail Colonel Cadaver rode up to the cabin home of the Gold King, and the grandeur of which, for that part of the world, had caused it to be dubbed "The Mountain Palace."

Indigo saw him coming and went out to meet him.

"Well, Indigo, is the King at home?"

"No, Massa Kernel, he am not."

"Where is he?"

"Dunno, sah."

"When did he leave home?"

"Last Sunday, sah."

"And you do not know when he will return?"

"No, sah."

"Are you anxious about him?"

"Oh no, Massa Kernel, for de boss kin take good keer o' hisself."

"But he is human, and death might overtake him."

"Yas, sah, Def are mighty quick arter all o' us; but I does believe dat de boss are goin' ter keep ahead o' it fer some time ter come, sah."

"I hope so, Indigo; but should your master return tell him I came here to see him, and that the Gold Wolves intend to attack him at sight, so to be on his guard."

"He allus am, sah; but I tells him when he do come."

"Say to him, Indigo, that Cruel Knife Kit is his worst enemy, and that the Gold Wolves are furious because he wounded their leader, Major Modoc, and killed Gringo, while they accuse him of knowing all about the mysterious disappearance of Bugle Bill and Parson Pete."

Indigo started slightly, and the quick eyes of Colonel Cadaver observed it; but he said quietly:

"Do dey say all dis ag'in' de boss, sah?"

"Yes, and his life is in danger, and I came to warn him."

"Thankee, sah; but I do wish he was here, for he'd ask yer in, but I can't do it, sah; but I'll tell him all yer says, sah, and thankee ag'in, kernel."

Colonel Cadaver wheeled his horse and rode back down the trail, turning into the canyon leading into the valley in which were strung out the camps that were called Gold Dust City.

As he left the base of the hills there came down the mountain path a horseman, who turned from the Overland road into the trail leading to the cabin on the spur—the home of Montebello.

One glance was sufficient to show that it was the Gold King himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

RED DARRELL'S GHOST.

I MUST now return to the Gold King, when he left the mining-camp after having dispatched Lawless Luke upon his mission to New Mexico, to hear the sealed papers to Kate Kittredge.

There was another way of reaching Gold

Dust City, by a trip through a mountain pass to the north, and which was hardly any further than the trail by which The Magnificent had come.

But it was not the nature of the Gold King to shun even that which he could not find out, and so he took the trail which would again lead him by the grave of Red Darrell, the man whom he had killed.

It was some time after nightfall when the Gold King reached the vicinity of the grave.

He knew that, after the death of Red Darrell at his hands, the road-agent band, of which the dead man had been chief, had left those mountains to carry on their lawless deeds elsewhere, so he feared no peril at their hands.

As for Indians there had not been any seen in the mountains for a year, excepting a straggling warrior now and then, and the Gold King felt that as far as meeting any human being there he need have no dread, as his own cabin, long miles away, was about the nearest habitation to him.

Arriving near the grave he determined upon a little act of strategy to discover just who and what the ghostly object was that he had seen.

He knew that it was no hallucination, and that his eyes had not deceived him.

This he was confident of. He had certainly seen an apparition, and it had stood over the grave of Red Darrell.

As near as he could tell in the moonlight it had appeared to be Red Darrell himself.

Having slain, and then buried that person, the Gold King felt assured that if it was the road-agent he was in the spirit and not in the body.

When in the mining-camp of Sunset City the Gold King had made a few purchases of a kind that he determined to make useful.

To do this he dismounted from his horse, unrolled his bundle, and soon rigged out what appeared to be himself.

It was a first-class dummy, and sat up in the saddle, with the aid of sticks strapped upon either side, as a live man might have done.

"Placing a sombrero upon the head of the 'dummy,' the Gold King started his horse at a walk along the trail, well knowing that the faithful animal would continue on his way until he heard his call.

"Now don't be frightened, old fellow, and run off and leave me among the ghosts," he said, as the faithful animal walked on his way, having glanced backward to see that his master was slowly following him.

The horse showed more uneasiness but not as much as upon the night before, and should he get frightened the Gold King did not doubt but that he could recall him in a run to his side if he gave his well-known whistle.

Could he not do so, and the animal sped on in his flight, he knew that he would go to his home, and he could but follow as best he might, if he escaped from the apparition in the mountains.

Following slowly along after the horse, the Gold King held his revolver in his hand.

He had drawn a pair of moccasins over his boots, so that his tread gave back no sound, and he muttered with some truth:

"I can slip up upon a ghost now unheeded."

As the horse approached the spot of Red Darrell's grave, the Gold King, who was a hundred yards behind, heard a loud snort and then the rapid clatter of hoofs, the sound gradually receding.

One of his shrill calls would doubtless bring Mephisto back to his side at a run, but to give this would be to destroy his little plot, so the Gold King said to himself in his quiet way:

"Mephisto has seen the ghost and has gone flying homeward."

"Now for me to see it."

With this he hastened on at a rapid, but noiseless step, and soon came in view of the grave.

The moon was shining brightly, and he beheld the same form which he had seen the night before, standing at the head of the grave, his arms folded upon his breast.

The face, as it appeared in the moonlight, was that of Red Darrell, the Gold King could have sworn.

The attitude was that of one who felt that he had accomplished his object, in putting the horseman to flight, and stood complacently listening to the rapid clatter of the flying hoofs.

He did not seem to realize that a human being was near, and did not see or hear the Gold King as he glided rapidly toward him.

When Montebello was within a few feet of the apparent ghost of Red Darrell, a startled cry broke from its lips, and its attitude meant war, for both hands dropped upon the pistols in the belt.

But the Gold King already had his revolver loaded, and he thundered forth:

"I cover you, ghost or man that you be! up with your hands!"

In answer to the threatening command of the Gold King, the ghostly-looking being raised both hands high above his head, and walked straight toward Montebello.

This bold act would have unnerved any man less fearless and given to superstition than the Gold King, especially when the moonlight fell upon the face of the one thus advancing, dis-

playing perfectly, as it were, the features of the dead road-agent.

But the Gold King did not move, but muttered:

"By Heaven! but I'll try powder and ball on him, and if they fail me, will see what steel can do," and he dropped his left hand upon his knife-hilt, while he said sternly:

"Halt, or I fire!"

But the ghostly-appearing being did not halt, but walked as boldly on, the hands still upraised, the face still staring, and the perfect picture of the man whom the Gold King had shot and then buried.

There could be no doubt of his having killed Red Darrell, and none of his having buried him there in that little pine thicket; but now before him, and within a few feet of his own grave appeared the road-agent, his counterpart, or his ghost.

"You heed not my warning, so I fire," cried the Gold King, and with the last word his finger touched the trigger.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ROAD-AGENT'S SECRET.

It will be remembered that the last installment closed at the critical moment when the Gold King's finger touched the trigger and his hand held a revolver leveled at the heart of the one who certainly appeared to be Red Darrell, the road-agent, or his ghost.

What it was, human or apparition, the Gold King had made up his mind to discover through the agency of powder and ball.

He knew now that the secret must be solved, for his horse had fled in fright, and he was on foot, face to face with anything he might have to encounter.

Just as his finger drew aim—and with a strangely steady hand for a man who knew not what he was firing upon, for even his bold nature, devoid of superstition, had been shaken by what he had seen—there came a loud cry, but the crack of the revolver drowned it and the supposed ghost fell to the ground in a heap.

With a bound the Gold King reached the side of the fallen man.

"You have killed me," came in a faint voice.

"I thought that I had done that once before," was the cool reply.

"You have done so now."

"While there is life there is hope; but you should not have dared me."

"I felt sure, up to the last moment, that I would frighten you off."

"No; I am not one to run from a reality, and certainly not from the seeming unreal; but let me see what I can do for you, for I do not believe that you are fatally hurt."

"Heaven grant your words are true; but I have a den up in the mountains a few hundred yards, and I will try and walk there."

"No; for the exertion may cut your life short; I will carry you; but first let me see if my horse is within hearing."

And the Gold King gave a long, loud, shrill whistle.

Again and again it was repeated, and then far down the trail was heard a neigh.

"All right; my horse will return now."

"But the man on him?"

"It is a dummy I rigged up as a decoy to catch you."

"You are the Gold King?"

"Yes; so men call me."

"I never saw you before last night, but I might have known it, as no other man would have faced what you did."

The Gold King made no reply, but raising the man as though he had been a child, he bore him by the grave of Red Darrell up into the mountain canyon, while behind them was heard the clatter of hoofs, as Mephisto came running up the mountain trail.

A short walk brought the Gold King to the head of the canyon, where sheltered by the rocks overhanging it was a small log hut.

A tree grew up from the canyon, close to the cliff, and all up its trunk were nailed stout foot-rests, forming a ladder to a bridge of poles seventy feet above, running out from the branches of the pine to the edge of the cliff.

"You see I cannot be hemmed in," said the wounded man, motioning to the tree.

"Yes, you are well fixed here—Ha! here comes my horse on the run," and the Gold King turned as Mephisto dashed up, and quick as a flash his revolver was leveled, and two reports mingled together, while a man fell heavily from the saddle.

"That was a cunning game to catch me, and well-nigh succeeded; but I discovered in time that it was not my dummy in the saddle."

"He must have caught the horse on the trail below, and recognizing it as your animal and discovering the dummy, took its place to come back and get the drop on you."

"That is just it, and he is a fellow I once had to punish for an attack on a poor fellow who could not defend himself."

"He evidently dogged my steps and was in ambush awaiting my return; but this is not looking after your wound."

Following the direction of the wounded man.

the Gold King found a candle, and the little cabin was soon lighted up.

A bed, a table, a few traps hung on the walls, with some cooking utensils upon the hearth and a cupboard of provisions comprised the furniture of the place.

Placing the man upon the bed the Gold King took from his pocket a small case of surgical instruments, and set to work to examine the wound.

It was not fatal, as the Gold King had surmised, the bullet having glanced on a rib, but it had left an ugly wound, which was dressed with the skill of a surgeon and the tender touch of a woman.

"You are too badly hurt for me to leave you for several days, so I will find a place to stake my horse out, and then make myself comfortable," said the Gold King.

"Do you see that cupboard?"

"Yes."

"Pull on this end of it and you will see that it opens like a door; then lead your horse through the crevice in the rocks, and you will find a valley with the finest water and pasturage beyond."

The Gold King did as he was told, and through a narrow chasm of the rocks, which the cabin hid from view and the cupboard protected, he led Mephisto some hundred feet into what was indeed a lovely valley, with long, juicy grass and a brook tumbling down from the mountain heights far above.

Staking Mephisto out to feed, the Gold King returned for the body of the man whom he had slain, and, finding a pick and shovel in the cabin, soon dug a grave for the body.

It was a villainous face, lying there upturned to the moonlight, a bullet-shot in the center of the forehead, and the Gold King muttered:

"It is Angry Joe, and one of the Gold Wolves; but I warned him, and he threatened me, and the end is as I anticipated."

Springing into the brook for a bath, after finishing his work, the Gold King returned to the cabin and threw himself down to sleep, for his patient was in deep slumber.

The sun was up when he awoke, and rising he went out to water his horse and change his grazing ground, merely glancing at the new-made grave, while his eyes fell upon half a dozen others that dotted the hillside.

"That fellow has done well," he muttered, as he gathered up a bundle of sticks and started to return to the cabin, pausing at the entrance to the chasm to gaze down the valley.

It was a spot, so wild, so picturesque and rich, that but for the graves on the hillside the Gold King could well believe that the foot of man had never desecrated its beauty.

It was a fairy spot, as it were among the wild and rugged mountains, and that its existence was not known to any of the denizens of Gold Dust City the Gold King felt assured.

Entering the hut again, Montebello found the wounded man still sleeping, so he built a fire and prepared breakfast, for the cupboard was well supplied with edibles, and haunches of venison hung in the chasm, along with birds and other game.

"You are very kind," said the wounded man, as the Gold King redressed his wound and then brought him his breakfast, which consisted of a cup of coffee, a juicy venison steak and some crackers toasted.

"I am but doing my duty to one who is a fellow-being," was the reply, and, having finished his own breakfast, and seeing that his patient was doing well, the Gold King drew up a bench and sat down by his side, while he asked abruptly:

"Who are you?"

"Do I not look like Red Darrell, the road-agent?"

"Yes, strangely so."

"I can trust you?"

"Yes, if you tell me the truth."

"If not?"

"I shall nurse you back to health, and then turn you over to the Gold Dust Vigilantes," was the cool reply.

"Better had your bullet proved fatal than that."

"True."

"If I do as you wish you will spare me?"

"Yes; for I need the services of just such a man as you."

"I'm your man, if I don't die," eagerly said the man.

"Oh, you'll pull through; but now, who are you?"

"I am not Red Darrell."

"As I killed and buried Red Darrell. I am well aware of that fact."

"My likeness to him is not accidental, for I am his brother."

"You look it, and as such can feel no regard for me as his slayer."

"That was simply the accident of being quicker on the draw and fire than was my brother, for had you not been he would have killed you, and you could not be saving my life now."

"After shooting you, yes; for you would have bled to death if left alone; but I do not know whether you are in earnest or playing a part."

"Try me."

"I will, but warn you that your life shall terminate suddenly if you deceive me; now tell me why you remained in these mountains after Red Darrell's death caused his band to seek other parts."

The man remained silent for a moment, and the Gold King sat watching him, his piercing eyes seeming to read his very thoughts.

"The fact is, Gold King, I happened upon a mine here."

"Ah! one you had found, and none of the others of the band knew of?"

"Not exactly that I found it, but the secret was mine, so I hung back while the others left, and so played ghost to keep any miner from prospecting in this region."

"And you have succeeded?"

"I have kept the mountains pretty scarce of miners, I can tell you, though one didn't scare worth a cent."

"Who was that?"

"The owner of the mine; you see I am talking square, Gold King."

"You appear to be, my man; but this miner you refer to was the real discoverer of the mine, and you but dogged his steps to it?"

"Yes."

"Is he from Gold Dust?"

"Yes."

"And you tried to frighten him by playing ghost?"

"I did several times, but he was a good deal like yourself, anxious to make the ghost's acquaintance, so I had to go slow."

"Who is he?"

"They call him in Gold Dust, Stranger Kit."

"Ha!"

And the Gold King started.

"You know him, then?"

"I have heard of him often, though he kept so close to his work and his cabin I never met him in the mines; but he is dead."

"Dead! then the mine is now mine," eagerly cried the road-agent.

"Oh, no; for Stranger Kit left a will, and a messenger is now on his way to inform the heir of the miner's death."

"That lets me out," said the road-agent in a disconsolate tone.

"It lets you out of claiming that which was never your own; but, until this matter about the heir is settled, I wish you to remain in the mountains and still play ghost, for I have noticed that, ever since men have reported seeing Red Darrell's spirit haunting these mountains, there has been very little prospecting here."

"Stranger Kit owned also the Ill-Omen Mine, and all he has goes to his heir; his papers doubtless told of this secret mine you know of."

"Now I am rich, as you doubtless know, and would not rob a dead man's heir, but the secret you hold, of the mine's locality, I will pay you well for, so that you will not suffer, and more, you will be well paid for your services to me."

"Now I will remain with you until I see that you are well enough to look after yourself, and then I will send you—"

"Do not send any one here, I beg you."

"It will be my negro man, Indigo, whom I can trust with my own life, and he will bring you what medicines and stores you need, and then you await further instructions from me."

"Now direct me to this secret mine, for I would have a look at it," and with a sigh the road-agent obeyed and the Gold King left the cabin, going by way of the chasm through the mountain-spur.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GOLD KING MAKES CERTAIN DISCOVERIES.

WITH a map in hand, giving the location of the Secret Mine, the Gold King left the humble cabin of the outlaw, and leaving Mephisto really "in clover," with the juicy grass about him, he walked rapidly down the little valley.

Soon he came to a bold cliff, and from its base he saw a well-defined trail.

"It was over that cliff that Stranger Kit entered this valley, and by means of a rope-ladder, Darrell says," he muttered, as he stood gazing at the edge of the cliff, fifty feet above his head.

As his eye followed the valley's limit, he saw that it was completely shut in by a cliff of rock, or impassable mountain-spurs, an Eden-like spot in the midst of a high and rugged range.

"It is no wonder that the miners have not found this place, for who would have expected to find this green valley here? But Stranger Kit managed to get off the trail and find it."

"And who was Stranger Kit?"

"Ah! who could he be but Carl Kittredge, when the letter he left was addressed to Kate Kittredge?"

"Well, in sending it to her I have but done my duty as a man, and may she reap the fortune her father has left her."

"With that father dead may not I— Bah! I forget, I dream; I am a fool, ay worse, and I will not allow such a thought to find place an instant in my brain."

"I cannot atone for the past, and an Inferno is between us across which the hands of love can never be clasped."

For some moments the man stood in silence, his brow dark, his lips sternly set.

Then casting off the spell that seemed to hold him, he walked on down the valley, following the trail before mentioned.

The trail led him into a canyon, and there he suddenly came upon a mine that showed evidence of having been well worked.

Carved in the bark of a tree in front of the mine, and most skillfully executed, was the following:

"KATE'S HOPE MINE."

"Discovered on a prospecting tour, June 2d, 18—, by Carl Kittredge, known in Gold Dust City mines as Stranger Kit."

Painted in black letters upon the rock over the mine was the same notice.

For a long time did the Gold King stand in silence regarding these notices, and then he said sadly:

"The hand that put them there is cold in death now; but Kate Kittredge is the heiress, and she shall have her inheritance."

"Now to see what the mine pans out, and I hope sincerely that the Kate's Hope will prove a fortune."

He entered the mine as he spoke, and it took his experienced eye but a very short while to discover that Stranger Kit had struck a very rich lead.

"There has been a large sum already dug out of this mine; but where is it?"

"Kittredge has hidden it away somewhere evidently, and his letter to his daughter doubtless tells where."

"But does Darrell the road-agent know?"

"I must sound him on this subject, for he shall not steal a dollar from that girl if I can help it."

The Gold King then returned to the cabin and said:

"The mine is a good paying lead, Darrell; but what has Stranger Kit done with the gold he got out of it?"

"Guess he took it to his cabin," was the evasive reply.

"I rather think not, but feel assured that he has hidden it somewhere in the valley, so out with it."

"It seems I cannot keep a secret from you, Gold King, so I'll out with it."

"You know where he hid the gold dust then?"

"I saw him go there every night after he knocked off work in the mine."

"You will tell me the place?"

"Yes, it's in a deep pool in a brook; he weighted the ends of a large blanket and sunk it in the pool, and then dropped the dust in on it, as he got it, so he could gather it all up at once."

"A good idea; but now give me the locality."

The road-agent did so, and the Gold King, after he had gotten dinner for them both, started out on the search for the treasure.

He found the spot without difficulty, gazed down into the pool, and throwing aside his clothes soon fished out the blanket.

There was indeed a treasure hid there, and the Gold King carefully gathered it up and then hid it securely in another place, after which he started back to the cabin, for darkness was coming on.

Thus several days passed away, the Gold King faithfully nursing the wounded road-agent, and seeing that he was so much improved that he could leave him, he bade him good-by, told him to remain in the cabin until he heard from him, and departed.

It was Sunday afternoon when he reached home, just a short while after the departure of Colonel Cadaver, who the reader will remember paid a visit to Montebello's cabin to set at rest the rumors regarding his deeds, as reported by the Gold Wolves.

Indigo met him with delight, for the faithful negro was himself becoming alarmed about his master.

"Has all gone well, Indigo?" asked the Gold King as he dismounted.

"Yes, massa, and no, sah, for them Gold Wolves is talkin' bad ag'in' you."

"Ah! is that so?"

"Yes, sah, they say as how you had shot down Major Modoc and Gringo and then lighted out 'cause you was skeert, and they do say Bugle Bill hev been kilt by you and ther parson too."

"Indeed! why I have been doing terrible things; but how is Bugle Bill?"

"Gitting pretty smart, massa."

"And the parson?"

"He are all right, sah, and hab prayer wid us all night and mornin' and do help Blue and myself amazin', sah."

"The parson has not been down in the camps?"

"No, sah."

"Anybody been here?"

"Seberal, sah, but I tells 'em you is away; but Colonel Cadaver were here leetle while ago, massa."

"He is not my enemy?"

"Oh, no, sah, he am all right, and done told me ter tell yer that Cruel Knife Kit was on ther war-path ag'in' yer, and ther Gold Wolves meant ter jump yer at sight."

"I chank him for his warning, now look after Mephisto well, and then come in and rub up my

weapons, for I think I shall ride down to the Paradise to-night, and I will take my bay mare Spitfire," and the Gold King passed on into the house, while Indigo led Mephisto to the stable muttering:

"Now massa do intend ter go on ther war-path sart'in, or he'd neber ride dat debble mare Spitfire."

"I rader give ten dollar den hab ter put de saddle and bridle on her."

Entering the cabin, unexpectedly to those within, the Gold King found Bugle Bill and Parson Pete discussing his long absence, while Blue, the negress, was squatted in the door, an attentive listener to all that was said.

A shout in Bugle Bill's stentorian voice gave him welcome, and Parson Pete sprung forward and grasped his hand warmly, while Blue exclaimed:

"Praise de Lor', massa, dat you is back ag'in, for we was gittin' anxious about yer, sah."

"It is worth remaining away longer than I expected to, to get such a welcome, but I was detained in the mountains."

"Come, Blue, I am as hungry as a wolf and longing for one of your good suppers."

"Well, Bill, how is the leg?"

"All right, sir, and the parson has been as good to me as my mother could have been; but there have been men here to see you."

"Yes."

"Has Indigo told you of the ugly talk in the camps?"

"Yes, I have heard of what I am accused."

"I only wish I was up, so as to be able to serve you."

"Never mind, for I anticipate no great trouble."

"Parson, would you like to ride into Gold Dust with me to-night?"

"Yes, verily would I, Brother Montebello, for my services are no longer needed here with our worthy friend, and I must set to work converting the heathen."

"I will be ever glad to have you as my guest, parson; but Bill is all right now, and if I am called away Indigo and Blue can look after him, while I have a motive in wishing you to set to work in the camps, for this community has got to be tamed a little, and those the Bible and your preaching won't reach, a revolver will."

"I shall have a church built for you, and you can board at the Paradise, and I believe you will do good work, and if you need a little powder and ball to back up your prayers, do not hesitate to call upon me."

"Colonel Cadaver you will find a true friend, though a stern, cold man, and his clerk, Señor Señora, will also be a pard to you."

"Bugle Bill you know you can rely upon, and there are others I could name who will be your friends, so that you will not be imposed on, parson, and you need have no fear of being ily used as you were before."

After a hearty supper the Gold King and Parson Pete rode away from the cabin, the former mounted upon Spitfire, a vicious looking mare that showed splendid points of endurance and speed along with a temper akin to Satan's.

Going along the trail the parson chatted pleasantly, while the Gold King rode on in stern silence, his eyes fixed upon the hundreds of twinkling lights that marked the miners' cabins in the valley below.

CHAPTER XVII.

MAJOR MODOC'S BOLD GAME.

WE left Major Modoc at an inn in the New Mexican town, not many leagues distant from the Chapel Hacienda of Padre Fanchon, where Kate Kittredge was held as a prisoner, for she was in reality nothing else, though seemingly possessing full liberty.

Having rested from his long journey, and gotten to feeling like himself once more, Major Modoc sent for the landlord to come to the pleasant rooms which he had engaged for himself.

The landlord bore the name of Señor Domingo, was a fat, jolly-faced Mexican to look upon, cordial, yes, sycophantic to his rich guests, harsh to his poor ones, and cruel to his servants.

He loved a dollar more than he did his soul, and was hoarding up treasures on earth with all the rapidity that he could, though he knew full well he could not carry them out of this world with him.

He had asked to see the color of Major Modoc's gold before he gave him the best room in his house, and this request being complied with, he had at once become obsequious in his attentions to his guest, who certainly seemed to have about him an air of mystery.

Asked to go to Modoc's room he had done so, the thought being father to the hope that he would get some reward thereby.

"You sent for me, señor?" he said, as he entered.

"Yes, be seated, señor landlord, and tell me if you have no better *aguardiente* than this you sent me as an appetizer, and why is it I had to eat my dinner with this very poor Mexatillo wine?"

"Señor, it was a mistake, and I beg a thousand pardons, for that *aguardiente* and Mexatillo was intended for room 10, and your liquors

doubtless went there," said Señor Domingo, with ready lie.

"Ah, I see; but I want the best, the very best, Señor—Señor—"

"Domingo is my name, señor."

"Well, Señor Domingo, understand that I want the best in all things, and I have the dust to pay for it."

"I feel that, señor."

"And I have gold to pay for other things, too, señor."

"Yes, señor; you look like a very rich man."

"I am better still."

"Better than rich?" asked Domingo in amazement that anything could be better than riches.

"Yes; I am a United States Government detective."

Señor Domingo turned pale, or rather livid, for his complexion was not of a kind to whiten.

"Yes; I am here on secret service, Domingo."

The Señor Domingo was like one palsied.

He was guilty of many a crime, and his every evil deed condemned him in his face.

Major Modoc saw that the landlord was frightened, so he said:

"It is not with your little crimes, Señor Domingo, that I have to deal just now, but with others."

"You I wish to have aid me, and I have gold to pay for your services."

"Oh, señor! I am more than willing to serve you," cried the now delighted host.

"Now, I wish to know if you are aware of any place in this vicinity known as the Chapel Hacienda Ranch?"

"Oh, yes, señor, for its owner, the Don Diaz, is one of my patrons."

"Who is the Don Diaz?"

"A Mexican ranchero of vast wealth, señor, who owns many ranches and thousands of cattle."

"Who is he?"

"Ah, señor, no one knows, other than that he has a brother who is a padre, and two sisters who are nuns, and they live at the Chapel Hacienda."

"Where does Don Diaz Murillo live?"

"In his town home and at his river ranch, señor."

"Do others dwell at the Mission Hacienda other than the padre and the nuns?"

"The servants and *vaqueros*, señor."

"No one else?"

"Ah, yes, señor; an American señorita, whose father is away some where and who was the intimate friend of Don Diaz."

"What is her name?"

"The Señorita Kate Kittredge."

"Ah, yes; well, Domingo, I wish you to purchase for me a handsome *caballero* suit, a fine horse and outfit, and engage for me a trusty guide."

"Yes, señor."

"Here is gold for you, and I want the best."

"Yes, señor."

And Señor Domingo eagerly grasped the gold extended to him, while he asked:

"When do you wish them, señor?"

"To-night; for to-morrow I take a trip into the country for a day."

"All shall be in readiness, señor," was the answer of the landlord, and so well did he carry out his orders that one seeing Major Modoc mount his spirited horse at the inn door and ride away with a guide the following morning would never have suspected him of being the miner who had so determinedly set about carrying out his plot to get possession of the papers left by Stranger Kit.

In spite of his fine feathers, so to speak, as a ranchero, Modoc Dan had his arms ready for an emergency, as he rode off on his mission, and he narrowly eyed the man who was his guide.

The fellow was well mounted and armed, and wore a bright new *serape*; but this was all that could be said in his favor, for his face was that of a born villain who had cultivated all of his opportunities for wrong-doing.

He was uncouth, untidy and a Mexican, and he belied his looks if the bright blade of his knife had not often been stained with the blood of his fellow-men.

Major Modoc, the miner, was a good reader of human nature, and he wrote his guide down as just what he was, and muttered to himself:

"I must have a care of this fellow."

Turning to the guide, as they reached the outskirts of the town, he said abruptly:

"What is your name?"

"Bono, señor."

"Bono means good, and your looks belie your name; but you doubtless are a good guide?"

"Yes, señor."

"You know the Mission Hacienda?"

"Yes, señor."

"You are sure?"

"It is the home of the Padre Fanchon, a brother of Don Diaz Murillo, is it not, señor?"

"Yes."

"I know it, señor."

"Are you known there?"

"As a guide, señor, yes."

"Can you keep your tongue between your teeth?"

"Yes, señor."

"See that you do, and remember that you know me only as the Señor Moreau, a ranchero."

"I know you, señor, as just what you tell me."

"Good! Now strike the trail for the Mission Hacienda, and lose no time in getting there, for our horses are fresh, and I have no desire to arrive after dinner," said Major Modoc, and, as they set off in a gallop, he muttered to himself:

"Now I will play my cards boldly, even if I have not got the papers left by Stranger Kit, and I shall win at all hazards."

CHAPTER XVIII.

KATE KITTREDGE RECEIVES A VISITOR.

IT was the day after the visit of Don Diaz to the Mission Hacienda that Kate Kittredge sat alone in her pleasant rooms.

Since the departure of the Don the padre and his sisters had found the maiden strangely moody, and she had nerved herself to wish to be alone all the time.

The truth was that Kate felt most deeply the death of her father, and yet dared not make it known that he was dead, as Don Diaz would at once claim the fulfillment of his contract.

So she had to hide her grief from all eyes, and set to work to plot an escape from the bondage in which she was.

The money she had found with the madman gave her ample for any ordinary wants, and she was coming to think that she must run away, and, going to the mines left by her father, take possession of them.

The party that had gone forth to bury the body of the madman returned and reported that they had done as directed, and greatly relieved was the maiden's mind when nothing more was said, for she was fearful of being asked if she had found any papers or articles with the dead man to lead to the discovery of who it was he had evidently robbed, for those at the Hacienda knew that the poor wretch a few days before had been utterly destitute, and finding him with a horse, it was very evident that he had not gotten possession of him honestly.

While sitting in her room, brooding over her sorrows and plotting to act for herself, a servant appeared with the somewhat startling information that a señor wished to see her.

"You mean the Padre Fanchon?" said Kate.

"No, señorita, he wishes to see you."

"He means the Sisters Terese and Serene."

"No, señorita; it was you, the Señorita Kittredge, that he asked to see," was the servant's answer.

Kate looked troubled. Who could it be, she wondered?

Then it came across her mind that it might be the messenger from her father who had been attacked and robbed by the madman from whom she had secured the papers.

With this thought, she told the servant to at once show the visitor into her cosy sitting-room, for there she knew that she could be alone with him.

The man departed, and with a beating heart, Kate Kittredge awaited the entrance of the visitor.

The rooms were so situated that one had to come through a long corridor to reach the sitting-room, and by arranging her chair in a certain position the maiden could see that no one approached near enough to hear aught that might be said, if spoken in an ordinary tone.

Taking her seat, the maiden waited for some little time, and then saw the servant returning, accompanied by a tall, well-formed man, with heavy beard and long black hair.

He was a trifle wild-looking with his long hair, and yet he was a handsome man, with an air of calm dignity about him.

It was Major Modoc, in the dress of a Mexican gentleman, with the heart of a villain beating beneath, and under the name of Mark Moreau.

He bowed low, in a courtly way as he entered the room, and Kate arose to receive him, and seemed utterly amazed at the exquisite beauty of the maiden before him.

"Do I address the Señorita Kittredge?" he asked, in good Spanish.

"Yes, señor; but as you do not appear to be a Mexican, may I request that we converse in English?" was the response, for Kate knew that there were curious servants about, and that they spoke very little, if any English.

"As you will, lady."

"May I also ask who it is that I have the honor of meeting?"

"Yes, Miss Kittredge, I am plain Mark Moreau, a miner of Colorado, who looked too rough in my mining-garb to call upon a lady, so wore this dandified Mexican dress in preference to top boots and a blue flannel shirt," explained Major Modoc, well knowing that he presented a striking appearance in the *caballero* suit, and which it had been his desire to do when ordering it.

But other than note the striking appearance of the man, and that he possessed courtly manners, Kate Kittredge thought of only one thing and that was his remark that he was a Colorado miner.

As such of course he came from her father, else why had he come to see her?

"Señor, you are welcome, come in what garb you may, when you say that you are a Colorado miner, for it was there that my poor father met his death, while striving to dig a fortune from the mines.

Modoc started, for he saw that the maiden was aware of her father's death, and how could she have heard it but through the papers which he had lost, for certainly no one else could have reached her with the news.

"She knows all, and I must go slow," he muttered, and to gain time to think, he took a chair to draw nearer to her, when he observed that a small tree growing under the window moved to one side.

There was not a breath of air stirring, so some one beneath had evidently swayed the ornamental tree.

"May I help myself to a glass of water, lady?" he asked, quickly stepping to the stand with the large silver tankard upon it filled with water, and which stood in front of the window.

"Do you not prefer wine, señor?"

"No, thank you— Ah! a *tarantula*! and in the tankard!" cried Modoc, and he dashed the contents directly out of the window.

A scream came from below, and springing to another window Kate beheld Padre Fanchon dodging away among the ornamental shrubbery of the garden, while her visitor said, in a sneering way:

"A strange thing for a nun to be beneath a window eavesdropping; but I gave her a drenching, and from her scream she evidently does not like shower-baths."

"It was Sister Terese, señor, beneath that window, while I saw Padre Fanchon take flight from under that one; and they were there to learn why a stranger had called upon me, for I am under their guardianship, and they are very kind, excepting that they must watch me continually."

"They have had a lesson, which they may believe was accidental, if so they wish; but I saw the servant first go to them in the garden before returning with word that you would see me, and I immediately expected listeners, when I saw the priest and one of the nuns walk rapidly away."

"Is what you have to say, then, that which you would not wish others to hear, señor?"

"It is of your father, Miss Kittredge."

"Oh! tell me of him!"

"You are aware that he is dead, then?"

"Alas! I accidentally discovered the sad fact from papers which I found in the hands of a dead madman, who had been wandering through the country, and whom I came upon in the mountains, lying where he had been struck down by a stroke of lightning."

The eyes of Modoc flashed with triumph, for unwittingly the secret of his being attacked and the robbery were now known to him, so he said, in a low tone:

"Miss Kittredge, I was the bearer of those papers to you, when I was shot at from an ambush by one I did not even see."

"My horse fell dead, the bullet intended for me entering his brain, and I fell against a rock, and was cut here, as you see, the blow stunning me."

"Upon recovering consciousness, I discovered that I had been robbed of my money, but that I cared little for when I found that the papers intended for you were also gone."

"I went on to the town, and then came here to tell you, as nearly as I knew, the contents of your father's letters, and I am rejoiced to know that they fell into your hands."

"Yes, and by the merest accident, too; you knew my father, then?"

"Yes; we were like brothers, and I was the only man in the mines whom he trusted."

"He was of a reserved nature and lived alone and a couple of miles from the camps, and he seldom entered the town, but now and then visited me at my cabin, for there was a fellow-feeling between us amid the rough element of the mines."

"I also visited him on Sundays, and he spoke of you so often that I felt as though I knew you well."

"It gives me pleasure, Señor Moreau, to know you, as you were the friend of my father; but tell me more of him."

And the tears came into Kate's beautiful eyes.

"Your father's death was a sad one, Miss Kittredge, for he fell by the hand of some cowardly assassin."

"I was off in the mountains prospecting at the time; but when I returned my comrades told how he had been found one morning outside of his cabin door, the papers you received in his hand, and as though he had fallen when striving to make his way to the camps."

"They gave to me the papers, knowing my friendship for your father, and I pledged myself to bring them to you."

"It was so noble, so kind of you, and I know not how I am ever to thank you."

And Kate Kittredge grasped the miner's hand earnestly, while the wretch said in a low tone:

"I but did my duty, Miss Kittredge, and, as

I know all about your father's affairs, I shall be glad to save you all the trouble I can and see that the mine is properly worked for you."

"There were two mines, were there not?"

Modoc started and cursed himself mentally for not having opened the sealed document; but he said quietly:

"Yes, there were two mines, Miss Kittredge, and both of them paying ones," he ventured.

"Well, señor, I am unable to tell you just how I am situated here, but I hate this place, luxuriously as I am situated, and I long to go away; in fact, I must go away, and ere very long."

"Can I aid you, lady?"

"Yes, for I have no one to call upon, and having been the trusted friend of my father, you will, I feel, be as a brother to me."

"To go to a mining-camp would be improper for me, and—"

"Permit me to suggest that you go to Pueblo in Colorado, for there I can arrange good accommodations for you, and visiting you now and then, for I have business interests there, I can give you full information regarding the working of your mines, and pay you the earnings."

"I thank you, señor, I will take your advice; but it is necessary that I leave here secretly, and—"

"Permit me to say that I will go to Pueblo, arrange for your coming there, and returning here will bring with me relays of horses which I will leave at points along the way."

"When I return to the neighborhood, I will in some way communicate with you, and you can arrange for an afternoon ride, meet me at a designated place, and I can so cover up our trail that it will be impossible to track you, while, if we are followed, and you seem to fear some one, I will defend you as the guardian your father would have left over you, had he been able to speak."

"Oh, señor! how can I thank you, for you know not what I fly from this place to escape?"

"But I will give you money for your expenses—"

"Señorita! I beg that you mention not gold between us; besides, your father has left you ample gold, which I have in my keeping back in the camps."

"You are so good to me, señor."

"No, I am but doing my duty, as I would have one act toward a beloved sister of mine."

"But, señor, have you no clew to my father's murderer?" suddenly asked Kate.

"Lady, that is a deep mystery, your father's murder, which I intend to some day unravel, and thereby bring the assassin to punishment."

"Yes, for the man who took my father's life shall not escape the punishment for his crime, and I will gladly spend my inheritance to bring him to justice."

"No, not a pound of dust need be spent, lady, for I feel that I can track him to justice; but now I will depart, as I fear my visit to you has attracted more attention than it should, and it would be best to say that I have merely come with a message from your father, whom I met in the northern mines."

"I will so tell the padre, señor; and now adios," and warmly grasping the hand of the villain, who was so deceiving her, she saw him depart, and shortly after beheld him riding down the valley, the guide Bono in the lead, and in no good humor at having lost his dinner at the Hacienda.

As she gazed from the window the padre and his Sisters entered the room, and their faces were dark and threatening, something Kate had never noticed in them before, as they had always been most gentle toward her.

CHAPTER XIX.

BONO MAKES A MISTAKE.

"WELL, señorita, this is a strange circumstance, that you should receive a visitor," and Padre Fanchon spoke with a sternness of voice and manner he had never before shown, while Sister Terese added severely:

"Yes, señorita, it is very wrong that a young girl should receive a visitor alone."

"I certainly do not think it as strange a circumstance, or as wrong an act, my receiving a messenger from my father, as I do in you, Padre Fanchon, and you, Sister Terese, playing the eavesdropper beneath my windows," was the sharp retort of the maiden.

Sister Terese uttered a slight cry, while Padre Fanchon said indignantly:

"Who dares accuse me, and my sweet sister, of such an act?"

"I do, for I saw you run away, when Sister Terese got a shower-bath, from the water tankard, which had a *tarantula* in it, I believe," and Kate laughed lightly.

"Ah, my child, I see that you misunderstood us, for good Sister Terese wished to pluck a flower growing under your window, while I stood a moment in the shade, from the sun's rays, awaiting her."

Padre Fanchon, at this hour of the day there is no shade beneath yonder window, the one under which you took refuge, and flowers do not grow upon cedar trees."

"You were in the garden when Señor Moreau

arrived, the servant told you he was here, and that I had ordered him shown to my parlor, and you came to hear what he had to say, when, had you entered by the door, or waited, I would have had you meet him, for the señor knew my father in the mines, had business calling him to New Mexico, and came by to tell me of my father."

"I hope that the señor, your father, is well!" said the padre, confident that he had not deceived the maiden.

"My father has been very successful in his mining, Padre Fanchon, the Señor Moreau informed me," warily said Kate.

"I would have been glad to have entertained the Señor Moreau, and heard him tell of your father, señorita, in whom we are all deeply interested," remarked the padre.

"Yes, it was most inhospitable to allow a guest to go unrested and unrefreshed from our roof," put in Sister Terese.

"So it was, but the señor had no time to remain, and hence departed," indifferently replied the maiden.

"Well, señorita, I hope, if you have other guests, I will at least be allowed to welcome them, in my own home, and, though I am merely nominally your guardian, I trust you will not cast me so utterly aside."

"It was your duty, Padre Fanchon, to have come openly here and met the Señor Moreau, and not attempt to eavesdrop on—"

"We will not discuss that matter, señorita, as you seem determined to misjudge the motives of good Sister and myself; but come, for dinner awaits us, and it pains me to think that a visitor should be turned away from our door just at this hour."

Kate smiled grimly, but made no reply, and followed the three to the dining-room.

Immediately after the meal she went to her hammock in the garden and tried to read, but dropped off into a deep sleep.

Awaking, she determined to take a ride, and ordered her horse, but was told that the padre had given orders she was not to go out of the grounds.

"Where is Padre Fanchon?" she asked, indignantly.

"He has mounted his horse, señorita, and left for the town."

"Ah!" and Kate returned to her own room, her face flushed with anger, for she felt that she was indeed a prisoner.

What the servant had said about the padre was true, for he had left the Hacienda immediately after dinner, mounted upon his favorite horse, and was accompanied by a *vaquero* who was the best trailer on the ranch.

"Take the trail of those two horses that left the ranch an hour ago, Benito," said the padre.

This the *vaquero* did, following the trail left by Modoc and his guide with the greatest of ease.

Those worthies in the mean time had ridden away from the Hacienda, Modoc in a good humor at the success of his plans, and Bono in ill-humor at having lost his dinner by the departure of his master just at the hour when the flavor of a tempting repast was floating on the air and reached the olfactories of the evil-faced Mexican.

From ill-humor Bono became bateful, and then vicious.

Domingo, the landlord, had told him that the señor was a man of vast wealth, and would pay him most handsomely, at the same time hinting that he believed him to be secretly a jewel merchant, who went from ranch to ranch selling his precious gems, which he carried with him.

The landlord had no such belief; but believing that his strange guest was a detective, who perhaps knew secrets regarding him, he knew of no better story to tell to cause him to lose his life, and no better man to engage to take it than Bono, the guide.

As he rode along Bono thought over the matter of growing rich suddenly, and having already arranged his plan of action, he branched off from the trail by which he had come.

"Ho, my man, you are going wrong," called out Modoc, whose quick eyes had noticed the act of his guide.

With a muttered malediction, Bono explained that the way he was going would be shorter by several miles.

"Then why did you not take that trail this morning, in going to the Hacienda?"

"Does the señor recall, as we crossed a creek, going out of town, that we saw two horsemen in the distance coming toward us?"

"Yes."

"They were on the trail I now wish to take, and I would have had to meet them, and one being my landlord, whom I owe rent to, I took the long way around to avoid him."

"Ah, I see," said Modoc, apparently satisfied with the explanation, and the guide kept on the way in which he had started.

Modoc was too good a borderman and trailer not to soon discover that the trail was by no means the shorter one, and it put him on his guard.

As long as it led him at least in the direction of the town he said nothing; but should Bono

attempt to go out of the way, he would feel confident of his treachery, and at once act accordingly.

The trail soon led them into a desolate defile of the hills, and suddenly the guide halted, sprung to the ground, and going ahead of his horse began to examine the ground attentively.

"What is it, Bono?" called out Modoc, drawing rein, as just there the narrow pathway prevented him from riding up to the guide.

"I am looking at a strange trail, señor."

"Bono, you are in my employ and have nothing to do with any other trail than the one that leads to town, so mount your horse and go on, for I am losing my patience."

The guide returned to his horse, raised his saddle-flap, as though arranging the girth, and suddenly, from over the back of the animal flashed a revolver and Major Modoc uttered a cry as he fell backward from his saddle.

But he was nimble as a cat, caught upon his feet, and, as Bono bounded toward him, the miner's revolver cracked and the Mexican fell headlong in his tracks.

"Curse the traitor! but for this bag of gold in my breast pocket he would have killed me," and Major Modoc drew from his pocket a buckskin purse of gold, which had the bullet of the guide in it.

"Even a buzzard may have fat on him," continued the miner, as he bent over and searched the body of the Mexican.

"Ah! he is well supplied with gold for a poor wretch who could not pay his rent."

And Major Modoc pocketed what he called his "pickings," and which were by no means inconsiderable.

"So this is the fellow that landlord Domingo engaged for me," he muttered, as he mounted his horse and rode on his way, leaving the Mexican lying in the trail and his mustang feeding near.

As he did not know the trail, and it seemed to be now leading from, rather than to the town, Major Modoc determined to return by the way he had come, so he took the back track to reach the spot where Bono had branched off from the direct route.

Just as he reached the spot he suddenly came upon a horseman, and both men drew rein with evident surprise.

CHAPTER XX.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE stranger horseman who so suddenly confronted Major Modoc was none other than the Padre Fanchon, and he seemed somewhat amazed at coming upon the man whom he had been following.

But Major Modoc raised his sombrero politely, crossed himself reverently and said:

"Señor Padre, I am glad to meet you, for I am in doubt as to whether this trail will carry me to the town."

"It will, my son, and I am going that way."

"I thank you, Señor Padre, for I was so unfortunate as to have a guide who proved treacherous and attempted my life—you see where his bullet cut its way and lodged in this purse of gold—but I shot him dead, and he lies in the trail several miles from here."

"Indeed! I must send some one to bury the poor wretch, for he is human, though a villain; but shall we ride on together?"

"With pleasure, señor, for I am a stranger in these parts, having business that called me to the town, and then I rode out to the Mission Hacienda of Don Diaz Murillo, where I went to see the daughter of an old friend whom I knew in the mines."

Major Modoc was a cunning man, and he made this explanation to throw the padre off the scent, as he had seen him out in the Hacienda garden and now recognized him.

He did not doubt but that the padre was on his way to inform his brother of the visit a stranger had made to Kate Kittredge, and pretending not to know him he had said what he did.

"Ah, señor, I have heard of your visit to the Hacienda, for I am the Padre Fanchon, the brother of Don Diaz, and I regret exceedingly that you did not remain and share our hospitality."

"I was in such haste, Señor Padre, as I have to depart soon from the town; but could not refrain from a call upon Miss Kittredge, to tell her of her father."

"I hope the Señor Kittredge is well?" said the padre.

"Perfectly, and hoping for an early visit to his daughter and the friends who are so kind to her."

The padre seemed pleased with his companion, and the two rode on to the town pleasantly chatting together.

Arriving in the outskirts, darkness had overtaken them, and the padre urged that the Señor Mark Moreau should accompany him to the house of his brother, Don Diaz.

But Major Modoc declined with thanks, and having thanked the padre for being his guide, he rode on alone to the tavern and sought his room.

He at once sent for landlord Domingo, and

the latter saw that there was anger in his eyes as he asked:

"Señor, did you know the guide well that you sent with me?"

"Oh, yes, señor."

"You considered him faithful?"

"Perfectly."

"I do not."

"Has he done aught to disappoint you, señor?"

"Do you see this hole in my jacket?"

"Yes, señor."

"And this indented gold?"

"Yes, señor."

"It saved my life, for here, you see, is the battered bullet which your guide fired at me."

"Oh, señor! señor!"

"He was a cunning fellow, landlord, planned well, aimed true, and meant to kill me, but failed."

"Señor!"

"Now, what was his motive, Domingo?"

The landlord hesitated, while his face paled and flushed by turns.

At last he said quickly:

"Señor, it was my fault, I fear."

"Your fault?"

"Yes, señor, for to make Bono serve you well, I told him that you were a jewel merchant, and he was, I fear, tempted to take your life, expecting to reap a fortune by his act."

"That was doubtless his reason, landlord; but I wish you to secure me the very best horse you can find in this place, and I want also, a good miner's suit, for I shall take another little trip to-morrow."

"You will need a guide, señor."

"No, I shall not take my chances with another of your guides, but go alone—well, what is it?" and Major Modoc turned from the landlord to a servant who entered.

"Don Diaz Murillo to see you, señor."

"Ah, yes, invite him up to my room, and, Señor Landlord, send me up some of your very best wine."

"Yes, señor," and Domingo left, congratulating himself upon his escape from suspicion, as Don Diaz was ushered into the room.

Major Modoc arose with a low bow to receive his visitor, and said pleasantly:

"Don Diaz Murillo, I presume?"

"I am Don Diaz, señor, and I have called upon you, Señor Moreau, learning from my brother that you were a friend of the Señor Kittredge?"

"Yes, señor, we have been friends, having been for some time in the mines together, and he asked me, knowing that I was to visit this town, to see his daughter and say that he was well and in full hope of making a fortune at no distant day," and Modoc poured out two glasses of wine and bade his guest be seated.

The Don gracefully dropped into a chair, and asked:

"Sent Señor Kittredge no word to me?"

"None, señor."

"Yet he knew that his daughter was under my charge?"

"He said not so, Don Diaz, but that I would find her at the Mission Hacienda, and upon arriving here only did I find that it was one of your estates."

"I delivered my message and departed, not wishing to intrude upon a recluse, as she appeared to be."

"Oh, no, the Señorita Kittredge is no recluse, nor does she intend to take the veil, as before very long she is to become my wife."

"Indeed, señor, I had not known of this."

"It has been kept a secret, Señor Moreau, as I deemed it best; but before the Señor Kittredge left it was arranged that the señorita was to become my bride within a given time, or, if aught happened to him, that she was to wed me."

"Ah!" said Modoc, feeling assured that he had gotten at the secret of Kate's desire to escape from the Hacienda, and assured that she did not love the Don.

"Yes, señor; but when did you see the Señor Kittredge?"

"About two weeks ago, as I tarried on the way," said Modoc, making the time longer, through some sudden impulse to do so.

The Don was silent for a moment, and then said:

"Señor Moreau, I have later news of Señor Kittredge than you bring."

"Indeed, señor?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what it is?"

"Yes, the señor is dead."

"Dead!" gasped Modoc, wondering if he was not caught in a trap by the cunning Don.

"Yes, I have news by messenger that he is dead."

"This will be a bitter blow to his daughter," ventured Modoc.

"Yes, but she does not yet know it, and shall not until I return from the mines, where I shall go to get full particulars and take charge of the property left by Señor Kittredge."

"Upon my return she shall know all, and then become my wife."

"I return soon, señor, and would be glad of your company," said the miner.

"I am not sure when I can get off, señor,"

was the evasive reply, and Don Diaz arose and departed, Major Modoc muttering, as he bowed him out of the door:

"You'll never reach your destination, Don Diaz."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE "PARADISE" BECOMES AN INFERNO.

It was Sunday evening in Gold Dust City.

No church bells echoing against the rugged mountains broke the silence of the night, if so it could be called, no rumble of wheels was heard, no clatter of hoofs, and therefore a stillness that could be felt rested upon the scene, only now and then broken by bursts of rude laughter, or a song.

The lights twinkled brightly in many a miner's cabin along the valley, and here and there some larger building was lighted up.

Such building, as one might suppose, it being a Sabbath evening, was not a house of worship; but, instead, it was in each case a bar-room, a gambling den, or a hotel.

The keeping of the Sabbath, as far as not working was concerned, the denizens of Gold Dust City religiously held to the commandment, "Six days shalt thou labor;" but they had far better been digging for gold in their mines than indulging in the orgies they were guilty of.

The Nabob Saloon was crowded with a noisy gang as the Gold King and Parson Pete rode up to it, the former saying:

"We will look in here, parson, that the boys may see that I have not run off, and you give out notice that you will preach next Sunday at the Paradise, for I'll arrange it so you can."

As the Gold King entered the saloon, for two-score men were there, drinking, gambling and talking earnestly in groups.

At that moment he was the subject of conversation, and many were wondering if he had after having, as it was said, killed Bugle Parson Pete, Gringo, and wounded Major Modoc.

Entering as he did, with Parson Pete, a like silence fell upon all.

The Gold King bowed pleasantly, without speaking, and walking up to the bar, said in a calm, musical voice:

"Nabob, the gentlemen present seem to have tongues too dry for utterance, so moisten up at my invitation."

"Come, comrades, call for your drinks."

A yell that shocked Parson Pete broke the crowd, and every man gathered about the bar, the Gold King having rapidly cast his eyes over the faces to notice that not one of the Gold Wolves was present that he recognized.

Parson Pete did not drink, for he was a man who lived up to his teaching as nearly as he could; but one bully seized a glass of liquor and was endeavoring to force him to swallow it when the Gold King seized the fellow by the shoulder, jerked the glass from his hand and dashed the contents squarely into his face.

"That gentleman does not drink, my man, so do not attempt such jokes again," the Gold King said, sternly, as the bully, with blinded eyes and half-strangled, staggered toward the door, the crowd laughing at his discomfiture, while Nabob, the saloon-keeper, whispered:

"Gold King, that were Sly Sam, and he'll knife yer, or shoot yer in ther dark, ef yer don't hev a watch on him."

Gold King made no response, but paid for the drinks and left the saloon, accompanied by the parson.

The moon was shining brightly, and as he walked toward the rack where their horses were hitched, the quick eye of the Gold King noticed that a man's shadow was cast with that of the animal ridden by the parson, and quick as a flash he threw forward his revolver and fired at the hand he beheld there over the saddle.

It held a revolver, upon the barrel of which the moon glistened, and it was so pointed that when the Gold King approached his horse the intended assassin would have held him at a deadly advantage.

With the crack of the revolver came a howl of pain and rage, and as the weapon dropped from the shattered hand, Sly Sam bounded away in the moonlight with the speed of a deer, while out of the saloon came pouring the crowd, who had just decided to adjourn to the Paradise and see the fun, as it was known that Cruel Knife and his gang were there, and had openly threatened to kill the Gold King should he return to Gold Dust.

Nabob had proposed the adjournment, and he was the first one out of his saloon, leaving his assistants to run the bar should a customer drop in, which was unlikely, with the attractions on hand at the Paradise.

"It are Sly Sam, or I falsifies the truth!" yelled Nabob, as he saw the form of the bully bounding away in the moonlight.

"Yes, he ambushed me behind the parson's horse, and I taught him a lesson by shattering his hand," was the Gold King's reply, and mounting his horse, accompanied by Parson Pete, he dashed off at a gallop toward the Paradise, followed by the crowd at a double-quick, for they wished to "be in at the death,"

and presaged a hot time to occur when The Magnificent should meet Cruel Knife Kit and his pards, with the chances in favor of the latter, for what could one man do against that band of desperadoes?

Seeing that if he tarried at other places, to look for Cruel Knife, the crowd would get ahead of him and reach the Paradise first, The Magnificent held on his way directly for that point.

If the Nabob Saloon had been a scene of wild carnival, the Paradise Hotel was far worse.

There were gathered over a hundred men, the better number of which were drunk, and the others were rapidly emulating their example.

The Sabbath evening had become a scene of wild orgie that beggars description.

The Señor Señora sat quietly in the little office, attending to his books, yet ever and anon glancing up at some more reckless scene than usual.

Colonel Cadaver was near, leaning against the office door, calm, stern and threatening, yet feeling that the revel was going beyond all bounds.

He had noted this a half-hour before, and had ordered his Chinese servants to remain on duty and near at hand, while Black Iron, the negro porter, huge, sullen and fearless, sat at the foot of the stairs, ready to obey his master's call.

He had also noticed that the miners were becoming quarrelsome, and muttered to himself:

"Dey means mischief, and as de Gold King ain't here ter speak for hisself, his friends in't able ter do much."

Then Black Iron had gone out to the kitchen. There he was a favorite with the two Irish men, and they gave him a warm welcome and tried to encourage him in talking.

"How are matthers afther going in the bar, Mather Black Iron?" asked the head cook, putting her arms akimbo and planting her two hundred pounds of solid flesh squarely before him.

"Looks squally like, Miss Biddy, for—"

"Don't call me Biddy now, for I am Bridget. I'm mad—Bridget Mulcahy, bad luck to the spalpeen whose name I tuk—and I'm Biddy and I am in a good humor."

"You mad to-night, Miss Bridget?" asked Black Iron, between the mouthfuls of pie.

"Is, mad is it I am, for that them honerary spens sh'd be afther making belave the Gold King is a bad man, is more than my Irish God can stand, and they is talking big about slaying this man and that man, beka'se he is not afther being here to defend himself, and them as w'd say a good word for him is dasn't do so."

"Faith, ef he'd be afther killing more of 'em it w'd be a blessin', for the graveyard is more becoming to them thin dacin't hotels, even ef they died without praste or prayer."

"It am rough, Missy Bridget, thet they sh'd talk ag'in' ther Gold King, fer he are a man as does more fer Gold Dust than all others together."

"But they is talking bad ag'in' him in yonder, and as ther kernal do look as though he were goin' ter say suthin' or blow up, I comes out ter tell yer ter keep ther water b'lin'."

"I hev done that same, Misher Black Iron, and put on extra ter loil, and don't yer hear it sizzin'?"

"Me and Mary Ann Muldoon will be in with our kittles and dippers at the first sound o' war, do yez moind that?"

Black Iron shuddered, for though he could face men, women with boiling water were terrors he dared not face, and he mentally concluded that the miners would go off peeled if the war did break out in the bar-room.

Returning to the office Black Iron found the crowd growing wilder, and the three men behind the bar had all they could do to serve the drinks ordered every moment.

The colonel still kept his stand, and the half-dozen Chinese waiters were ranged along the hall near the stairway, evidently frightened, but ready to obey the colonel's call.

Black Iron also noted that in the back door two of the stable boys, an Indian and a Mexican, having been sent for, had taken up their places, ready for the call of their chief, Colonel Cadaver.

"We is strong, but them crowd hain't gwine ter stop fer nothin' this here night," muttered Black Iron, and immediately after he added:

"The kernal knows he don't dare say nothin' now, or thar'd be a explosion."

The cause of all this excitement, which was turning the Paradise into an Inferno, was the Gold King.

Since the death of Stranger Kit the young miner, Bugle Bill had not been seen, and Parson Pete had also disappeared.

Then the Gold Wolves were around in force, with Cruel Knife Kit as their chief, and they were boldly accusing the Gold King of having killed Stranger Kit, Bugle Bill and Parson Pete, while they told how he had ridden into their camp and shot down Gringo and Major Modoc, killing the former and severely wounding the latter.

There were defenders of the Gold King hud-

dled together in the end of the bar-room nearest the office, and they were asserting that he had not taken flight to escape death at the hands of the Vigilantes, as the Gold Wolves asserted; but they were in the minority, at least those were who dared to openly defend him.

The Gold Wolves were fully two-score in number, and they had gained over to their side half as many more of the Gold Dusters, while a number remained silent, afraid to side with the defenders of Montebello, yet unwilling to take sides with his traducers.

All knew that the Gold King had done much for Gold Dust City, and more for those in it who needed aid; but the rough element feared him, and were now determined to get rid of him.

The Gold Wolves did not believe that he had killed the three men they asserted, and well knew that he had not shot down either Major Modoc or Gringo; but they used these charges against him to excite hatred for him and a feeling that would quickly end his life did he return.

Thus was it that the Paradise Hotel became the scene of a wild orgie of desperadoes, who only needed a spark to set the magazine of hatred into a blaze.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GOLD KING'S RETURN.

THERE was no man in Gold Dust more dreaded, as a reckless desperado, than Cruel Knife Kit.

He possessed strength of form that made him a terror to his comrades, and he seemed to revel in scenes of carnage.

He wore several knives in his belt, one a long-bladed, cruel-looking, double-edged instrument of destruction, which, with his skill in the use of it, had given him his name.

Many a victim of his frenzy lay up in the cemetery, and so skillful was he in throwing the knives he carried that men said he had without doubt once been a circus juggler.

He carried two revolvers also, and was, in fact, a "walking arsenal."

Never intoxicated, yet drinking more liquor than any three men in Gold Dust, he was looked upon as a wonder.

He had a voice like the roar of a bull, and when he was talking, in his wild, blustering way, others were compelled to keep silent.

And Cruel Knife Kit it was, whose thunder tones were reverberating through the Paradise Hotel, as he denounced the Gold King, and those who did not agree with him, while those who did, whether from a belief in his words or from a fear not to acquiesce, kept up a running applause.

"I tell you, pards," shouted Cruel Knife Kit, bringing his hand down on the bar with a force that made the glasses dance, and knocked a few off upon the floor:

"I tell you, pards," he repeated, in a roar, "This here town hain't no place to be run by one man, says I."

"It are a mining-country, and this are a mining-camp, and we thet lives here is free, white and twenty-one year old, 'cepting the nigger o' ther Paradise and ther Chinese, who hain't no better."

"Now hear me shout thet a man, one man, comes here, has papers ter claim twenty or more mines, lives like a fighting-cock on his throne on ther mount'in, pays poor men ter work them mines, and is called ther Gold King."

"He are brave, I admits; but he puts in his lip whar it sh'd not be, and jist says he'll run this town."

"What are ther result?"

"He is ther king bee, lives on ther fat o' others, kills human beings as he pleases, lays up his gold, and jist scares the Gold Dusters half out o' ther wits, fer none of yer has ther narve ter say he's got ter git out, or keep quiet."

"Now Major Modoc are in his cabin, wounded by thet Gold King; Gringo, our pard, are in his grave; thet parson, whom I knows to have been a rich man in disguise, hev been got rid of; Stranger Kit are kilt; Bugle Bill are missing, and I lays all at ther hand o' ther Gold King, for he are ther guilty one, and—"

"You lie, you infamous brute!"

Cruel Knife had paused for breath, and then had come in the deep tones of the Gold King the above words, as he suddenly stepped into the bar-room.

He was alone, or if others were with him they were out in the office hall of the hotel.

Tall, commanding, calm and stern, though with eyes that seemed on fire, he fearlessly entered the bar, and stood confronting the large crowd, his hands resting upon his revolvers.

A wild cry broke from the lips of the astounded Cruel Knife Kit, and quick as a flash he had his long-bladed knife in his hand; but equally quick and before he could throw it, came the crack of a pistol, and the blade dropped from the shattered hand.

But either hand was the same to the desperado, and his left had also drawn another knife, when a second shot broke his arm, and it too dropped upon the floor.

This had not taken two seconds of time, and yet Cruel Knife Kit was out of the fight, and howling like a wounded buffalo at his helplessness and pain combined.

But a pard of his had also drawn and leveled, and his weapon flashed with that of the Gold King.

The latter stepped back as though hit, while the one he fired on dropped dead, a bullet in the center of his forehead.

"Next!" came in the Gold King's ringing voice, and two-score of weapons were now drawn by the desperadoes, while a few men sprung to the wall behind Montebello to go to his aid.

Thus they stood at bay, waiting for a move from either side to usher in a deadly combat.

But at this moment Colonel Cadaver sprung into the room, and by his side was Señor Señora, both with their revolvers in their hands, and at their back came Parson Pete, Black Iron, the Chinese and stable force, and an instant after two others forced their way in, just as the colonel shouted to the Gold Wolves:

"Gentlemen, this bar-room is mine, and I order you out of it. Go!"

If the Gold Wolves, knowing their strength in numbers, had any idea of remaining and fighting it out with the Gold King and his supporters, they changed their minds with an alacrity that was amazing in the extreme, when in between the threatening sides sailed two forms.

One of these was Mrs. Bridget Mulcahy and Miss Mary Ann Muldoon. In the left hand of each was a huge tin kettle, and in their right hands, more formidable than a revolver or knife, a long-handled dipper.

"Be afther going, ye mutherin' devils, or I'll pale yez from head to hale with scaldin' wather."

Suiting the action to the words, Mrs. Mulcahy and Miss Muldoon threw a dipper full of water over the heads of the desperadoes and advanced for an attack.

Wild yells of terror broke from the gang, and out of windows and doors they went with a rush that was most ludicrous, leaving the two women in triumph to hold the fort, and the Gold King and his supporters roaring with laughter.

Wounded and in agony, helpless and enraged, Cruel Knife Kit rushed off with the gang.

"Ho, Black Iron, go after Cruel Knife and tell him to come back here and let me dress his wounds, for there is no one else to do it, and he will die if they are not attended to," called out the Gold King, and the negro darted away in obedience, while Colonel Cadaver said, savagely:

"Let the devil die, Gold King."

"Perhaps it would have been best to have shot to kill him; but I hate to take human life if it can be avoided, and wounded him only in self-defense."

"He'll come, sah, ef yer don't want ter kill him," said Black Iron, returning.

"I'll go afther ther spalpeen," cried Bridget.

"Pray do not, Biddy, or you'll run every miner out of the mines, for you are more to be feared than a regiment of soldiers," and Gold King passed out of the hotel into the roadway, where the gang had gathered.

Boldly walking toward them, he said:

"Men, I want no quarrel with you, and to prove it have come to care for your leader."

"Come, Cruel Knife, I shattered your right hand and broke your left arm, and you'll bleed to death if you are not looked after, so come and stop at the Paradise at my expense, and I'll dress your wounds."

"Does yer mean it, Gold King?" moaned the desperado.

"Yes, and I invite the crowd back for a drink, after which you had all better go home."

"But that Irish she-devil will scald us!" cried a thirsty soul who did not care for liquor washed down with scalding water.

Gold King laughed, and others joined in, so it put the crowd in a good humor, while Montebello said:

"Biddy's a terror, I admit, but she'll not scald you if you go in as friends of mine."

"Come, gentlemen, for Kit, here, must be looked to, and there is one of your pards lies dead in yonder, and you must carry him off for burial, and send the bill to me."

A yell broke from the gang at this, and three cheers were given for the Gold King, who led the way into the bar and ordered drinks for all, while he held a glass of brandy to the lips of Cruel Knife, and then told Colonel Cadaver to give him a good room and asked Señor Señora to aid him in dressing the desperado's wounds.

After their drink the wild crowd dispersed, cheering for Gold King, who, by his return, had given the lie to the rumor that he had run off, and having Parson Pete with him had falsified the story that he had killed that worthy man.

"Pards, ther Gold King are back, he hev laid Cruel Knife up fer repairs, has tarning Bad Ben's toes up fer good, fetched back ther parson, and durned ef I believes he are what it hev been said he are," yelled an enthusiastic admirer, who, a few moments before was thirsting for the scalp of the man he now lauded to the skies.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BEARER OF ILL TIDINGS.

THE return of the Gold King created an impression of a marked kind in Gold Dust City, and it was in his favor.

The Gold Wolves, with their vicious and desperate leader, Cruel Kit, placed *hors de combat*, were willing to draw out of the affair as best they could.

They were well aware that their charges against Montebello, of having killed Gringo and severely wounded Major Modoc, were wholly false, and his having returned with Parson Pete, it was evident to their minds that the other accusations, regarding Stranger Kit's death and Bugle Bill's disappearance, were equally untrue.

They were therefore glad to withdraw from the Paradise at least on friendly terms with the Gold King, as they well knew, did he so wish, he could bring the whole of Gold Dust City down upon their camp, for many only wished a leader to attempt to wipe out the Gold Wolves.

It might be, it is true, that the basis of this desire, in the hearts of many of the Gold Dusters, was to get the gold believed to be stored away by the Gold Wolves; but, be that as it may, the Gold King had but to hold up his hand to have a thousand volunteers against the four-score desperadoes, and the latter were aware of this fact, so retired in good order.

Having shot Cruel Kit just where he aimed to hit, and which conclusively showed that he did not wish to kill him, the Gold King's deadly marksmanship won higher favor on all sides, while the man he had killed had been dropped with a bullet directly between the eyes.

All knew that there was no chance in these shots, while the courage of the remarkable man, entering the bar-room alone against such a mad crowd threatening his life, and when Cruel Kit was fanning the flame against him with all his eloquence, showed that he was not to be intimidated by any odds.

Thus it was that the Gold Wolves were glad to retreat as they did, and stopping at the saloons en route to their canyon camp, they rung the praises of Montebello the Magnificent in untiring voices.

The last deeds of the Gold King also spread entirely through the camps before morning, as homeward-bound miners stopped at the cabins of those who had not been at the Paradise, woke them up and told them of the affair in glowing terms.

In the mean time the man who was such a hero was quietly dressing the two wounds he had given, as tenderly as a woman might have done, and, aided by Colonel Cadaver and Parson Pete, soon had Cruel Kit as comfortable as could be expected.

"Pard Gold King, I have hated you, because you dressed like a dandy, had plenty o' dust, and was up while I were down; but I'm yer friend from this night, and I thanks yer thet yer didn't kill me, fer, bad as I are, I loves livin' better than dyin'."

"I is yer friend, I says, and I'd give yer a grip on it, only I can't, fer these here fingers hain't ther grasp in 'em they had awhile ago."

"They will have, Kit, so do not worry," was the Gold King's kind remark, and leaving a miner as a nurse with the wounded man, and telling him that he would pay all dues, Gold King left the room.

Parson Pete had just gone to his room, along with Colonel Cadaver as an escort, and thither the Gold King wended his way.

"This is a pleasant room, parson, and the colonel will take the best of care of you, and remember, you are my guest."

"In the morning the colonel will tell you where is the best place to pitch your chapel, and you can draw your own plan and set the idle men to work on it at once, and it will not be long before you have a congregation you will be proud of, for my word for it, you will have more devils in it than ever were converted from the error of their ways before," and leaving the colonel to help Parson Pete get things to rights in his room, and declining an invitation to remain all night, the Gold King bade them good-night and took his departure.

The bar had closed, the Chinese waiters had sought their den for the night, and Black Iron was asleep in the office, where a dim light was burning.

Pausing out upon the piazza, the Gold King dropped his hand quickly upon his revolver as he beheld a form standing there, for he did not know but that some enemy might have remained behind to get the drop on him.

"It is I, Señor Gold King," said a low voice.

"Ah, Señor Señora, it is you, is it?"

"Yes, señor, and I wished to see you, so I remained here to await your coming out."

"How can I serve you, Señora?" asked the Gold King, in a kindly way.

"Señor, why do you remain here in this wild land, when you are immensely rich, and could dwell anywhere?"

"Here you are in deadly peril every moment of your life, and with your refined nature you are not at home among desperadoes, so why remain?"

"From choice, señor, for I came here to seek a fortune, and must be content to put up with all that I have to come in contact with."

"But you have a fortune, señor?" urged the young Mexican.

"Yes, but it amuses me to gain more. I do good with it rather than harm, and this wild life rather chimes in with my humor, for it causes me to forget that which it is painful to remember."

"Ah, señor, you certainly can have nothing to regret in the past that has caused a stain to rest upon your conscience?" said the Mexican, and in a tone that seemed to urge a confession.

"Señor Señora, you speak of my being here in this wild gold land; do you know that I think you wholly out of place where you are, for you, too, were reared in refinement?"

The young Mexican started, and hesitated, ere he replied:

"Señor Montebello, you have turned the tables upon me, for I admit that I should not be here; but alas! I came here for a purpose, and I must remain," was the sad response.

"Well, Señora, if I can help you in any way, command me."

"Now, good-night," and grasping the hand of the young Mexican, the Gold King went out to the stable, called for his horse, and mounting, rode rapidly away through the deserted camps.

He had left Gold Dust behind him, and climbing the mountain trail was near the path that turned off toward his cabin, when he heard the clatter of hoofs.

Instantly he was upon his guard, and halting, awaited the approach of the one who was coming.

A moment after a horse and rider dashed into view, but upon seeing the Gold King came to a sudden halt, while a movement showed that a weapon was quickly drawn.

"Hold! I have you covered, and would know who you are."

"I am a woman, and I seek the mining-camp of Gold Dust City," was the terse reply, delivered in a voice that was rich in tone and perfectly self-possessed.

"It lies in the valley beyond this mountain spur, lady," was the reply of the Gold King, who was surprised at meeting a woman alone at night on that perilous trail.

"Thank you, señor; but will you tell me where lives one whom men call Montebello, the Gold King?" and there was an accent to the speech that betokened the speaker to be a foreigner.

"I am Montebello, lady, and men call me the Gold King," was the quiet reply, and the Gold King started to ride forward, when crisp came the words:

"Hold, señor! I must be on my guard, and know you to be the Gold King, ere you approach."

"How can I prove it to you?"

"Have you sent any one on an important mission of late?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"He left here one week ago to-day."

"His name, señor?"

"Luke Lawless—or rather, as they call him in the mines, Lawless Luke."

The woman at once rode forward and drew rein at the side of Montebello, while she said, earnestly:

"Yes, you are the Gold King, and I could have known it had I seen you as I do now."

"Señor, I have come to seek you, and I came from Lawless Luke, who now lies hovering between life and death."

"Great God! he has been foully dealt with?"

"Yes, señor."

"And the papers he was the bearer of?"

"Alas! señor, the one who sought his life robbed him of those papers," was the reply of the woman, and at her words something very like an oath broke from the lips of the Gold King.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SEÑORA ESTEVAN.

It was a startling piece of news to hear from the lips of the strange messenger, that Lawless Luke had been perhaps fatally wounded, and the papers he bore taken from him, and the Gold King sat upon his horse in deep thought for an instant.

Then he asked simply:

"You have come from Luke with this message to me, señorita?"

"Yes, Señor Montebello."

"When did you leave him?"

"Twenty hours ago, señor, and I have ridden hard, changing horses five times, and this last one, you see, has been driven at his best."

"Yes, lady; but how have you come here alone?"

"I am a border girl, señor, and can find my way anywhere, even when there is no trail."

"You deserve great credit; but now come with me to my home, for I live half a mile up this open, and we will talk over the matter."

The woman made no reply, but wheeled her horse alongside of the Gold King's, and the two set off up the trail to the cabin.

Here and there in Gold Dust a light glimmer-

ed in some cabin, and several windows in the Paradise Hotel were lighted up, perhaps where Cruel Kit lay, and the Señor Señora was still up meditating upon his interview with the Gold King.

A shrill whistle, given before reaching the cabin, brought Indigo out to take his master's horse, and he was seemingly surprised at seeing a woman accompany the Gold King.

"Blue, give us some supper, and see that the spare room is prepared for this lady," said the Gold King, and drawing out his watch, he continued:

"It is one o'clock, and we will have some little time for a talk before Blue gives us supper."

"How is Bugle Bill, Blue?"

"Spry, massa, mighty spry, sah," was the answer of the good negress, as she bustled around about her duties, for when the Gold King was expected home any night, neither she or Indigo went to bed, but sat up in the kitchen taking cat-naps and chatting over good old times when they were young lovers on the old plantation.

After the woman had refreshed herself in the spare room, she entered the one where the Gold King sat, and the light of the lamp fell full upon her.

She was dressed in a riding-habit of buckskin, beaded and fringed, and it fitted her form perfectly.

She wore a soft sombrero, dove-colored, upon her head, and around it was a cord of gold braid, while upon the side was a gold star.

Her face was dark, rich in hue, her hair and eyes extremely black, and though not beautiful there was something very attractive about her, for her teeth were white and even, and her features were well-marked with frankness and resolution and innate goodness.

She was slightly above the medium height, graceful and well-formed, and in a leather holster upon either hip was a revolver, while a knife was thrust into the red scarf about her waist.

That she was a Mexican was evident; but who and what could she be, the Gold King wondered.

"Señorita," he said, in his calm, courtly way, "may I ask you to tell me of poor Luke?"

"Señor, he started on an errand for you, as a bearer of dispatches of importance to some one in New Mexico, not far from Santa Fé, I believe."

"He told me that he was joined in the coach by one who appeared to be, from his gray beard and locks, an aged miner, and he suspected no harm from him."

"But this man, while he slept, drove a knife into him twice, and the blow seemed to paralyze the messenger, as he could offer no resistance, though he was conscious of what was going on."

"He says that the old man then asked the driver to allow him to get upon the box with him, and that a moment after the stage stopped, and the old man was the master of the situation."

"He had killed the driver, you mean?"

"Yes, señor, and robbed your messenger of his papers and money, after which he took two of the horses from the coach, one of which he saddled and the other led, the latter bearing a treasure-bag that was on the stage and contained gold-dust."

"Well, señorita?" calmly asked the Gold King, as the woman paused.

"The Señor Luke heard him ride away, but was powerless to move, and he would have died had I not happened along while hunting in that locality."

"I saw that he lived, so stanching the flowing blood, dressed his wounds as best I could, gave him a draught of water from my canteen, and aided him upon my horse."

"I lived several miles away, but he stood the ride well, and then I set to work to care for him, aided by my young brother, who shares my lonely life with me."

"Seeing that I could leave him, I went to the stage station and reported what had happened, and men started at once upon the trail of the murderer; but he must have been a skillful trailer, for he so covered up his tracks that they could not follow him, and I had the greatest difficulty in trailing him to Rocky Ranch on the Canadian."

"Ah! you tracked him then toward Santa Fé?"

"Yes, señor, but lost him there, so returned to the wounded man, whom I felt anxious about."

"I found him desperately wounded, yet with hope of his recovery, and, as he urged me to come to you, as soon as I dared, I left him under the care of my brother Luis, a youth of eighteen, and came here to tell you all that had happened."

"You have been most kind, señorita."

"I am *señora*, señor, for I am married," was the low reply.

"Pardon me, but you scarcely seemed over the age that you have just said your brother is, and—"

"I am twenty-two, señor, and much of sorrow has been heaped in those years."

"Señora, the lives of all of us, it seems, are full of sorrow; but may I ask your name?"

"Stella Estevan."

"Señora, permit me to ask, if you know, where Luke was joined by this old stranger?"

"At Sunset City, señor, he said."

"Ah!"

"And did he rob him of the papers, as though he knew that he carried them?"

"The Señor Luke seemed to think that the papers were the object of his attack upon him."

"And he went toward Santa Fé, you say?"

"Yes, señor."

"I thank you; but come, for Blue has some supper for us, and then you must seek the rest you so much need after your hard ride."

"I must return in the morning, señor."

"You can, if so you wish, and I will follow as soon as I have taken up the trail at this end of the line; but may I inquire where this happened?"

"Upon the Buena Vista trail, señor, three miles from the Red-rock stage station."

"Thank you," and the Gold King led the way to the dining-room, where Blue had set out a most tempting repast.

CHAPTER XXV. EXPOSING A FRAUD.

THE sun was high in the heavens the next morning, when the strange woman, who had given her name as Stella Estevan, mounted her horse and rode away from the Gold King's cabin, upon her return to her home where she had left Lawless Luke lying between life and death from the wounds given him by Major Modoc.

After her departure the Gold King had a conversation with Bugle Bill, who fretted greatly that he was unable to be about, though his broken limb was doing even better than could be expected.

After a long and confidential talk with Bugle Bill, the Gold King again mounted Spitfire and rode away, taking the trail to Gold Dust City.

But before he reached the main camps he turned into the canyon which was known as the Gold Wolves' Den.

Up this he rode, his air that of a man who was utterly indifferent, though his eyes were upon every object, and his weapons ready to be drawn in an instant.

An extra weapon he carried on this occasion in the shape of a repeating rifle slung over the horn of his saddle.

As soon as he came in sight of the camp of cabins he was seen by the dozen men that were visible here and there attending to various duties, idling, playing cards or sleeping, and there was a general stir among them.

They were the detail who each week had to attend to the camp, being selected every Sunday while the remainder of the gang were off, either at work in the mines, gambling in the Gold Dust saloons, prospecting or hunting, as best suited their humors.

Visiting the other camps in and about Gold Dust one would hardly see a human being in midday, unless he had remained home from sickness or some other good cause, and these honest miners often commented upon the fact that the Gold Wolves never left their dens without a large guard, which certainly had a suspicious look, to say the least.

Some of those who were acting as guard had been at the Paradise the night before, and they wondered at the coming of the Gold King to their Den, while all present had heard of just what had occurred there, and there was a general gathering together of the desperadoes, who did not know whether it was peace or war that he came on.

The Gold King saw the gathering of the clans toward a given point and yet appeared to take no notice of them.

He rode directly toward the cabin of Major Modoc, and thither the Gold Wolves wended their way, arriving there as he drew rein.

Poker Saul came out of the door as the Gold King halted, and Toddy Tom was behind him, while Benzine Bob, the third man in the secret of Major Modoc, came up with the crowd, which now consisted, all told, of just thirteen men.

The Gold King did not seem in the slightest degree excited, smiled pleasantly, and said:

"Good-morning, gentlemen."

"Waal, pard, how is yer?"

"Good-mornin', pard."

"Hello, Gold King."

"What's up, pard?"

"Is you huntin' a row, Magnificent?"

Such were the salutations that greeted the Gold King, and as he knew well that he must not be bullied for an instant, he answered the last questioner with:

"If I was, Jake, I'd never expect to have trouble with you, who are afraid of your own shadow."

A curse came from the man's lips, while his companions laughed, for Jake was not considered dangerous.

"My object in coming here, gentlemen," continued the Gold King, "was to act in self-defense, for I have heard that I am accused of having killed one of your band by the name of Gringo, and severely wounded Major Modoc your chief."

"You all know that such is not the case, and

more, I have my doubts about Modoc's having been wounded, so I am here to see."

"He are wounded, pard Gold King, and mighty bad at that," said Poker Saul.

"When was he wounded?"

"Ther day you was last here."

"And Gringo is dead?"

"He are."

"When was he killed?"

"Same time Major Modoc were wounded."

"You are of course aware that I didn't kill the one or wound the other."

"You has tarning up the toes o' several of our band."

"That has nothing to do with the present affair, though I have killed several of your gang who have tried to get rid of me, and I will doubtless have to do as much again for the good of Gold Dust City," was the cool response.

"You laid Cruel Knife up," persisted Poker Saul.

"Yes, and he congratulates himself that I did not kill him; but I wish you to answer me, that you know well that I had nothing to do with the killing of Gringo or wounding of Modoc?"

"I has never said you had."

"Others of your gang have."

"Waal, maybe they knows."

"Do you not know, sir, that I did not?"

Poker Saul was silent, for he had either to back down or hold the position into which he had thrust himself.

"Answer me, Poker Saul, for I did not come here to trifle."

"Still no reply."

"Well, I shall see that Modoc answers me," and the Gold King sprang lightly from his saddle.

"No, you can't see him, for nobody but we who has nursed him kin see him," threateningly said Poker Saul.

"I have made up my mind to see him, so stand aside, for as a surgeon I can do him good rather than harm," was the determined response.

"I are looking arter him, and I doesn't ask fer your services," and Poker Saul stood his ground.

But only for an instant, for, with the bound of a panther upon his prey, the Gold King was upon him ere he could draw a weapon, and Poker Saul was hurled into the cabin with a force that was terrific, while he lay where he had fallen, under a table, the legs of which he had smashed so that it fell upon him.

At the same instant Toddy Tom, who had sprung to the rescue, was seized and pitched on top of his chief; his belt of arms having been torn off of him by the now aroused Gold King, who, quick as a flash turned toward the door and called out:

"Men, I shall stand no nonsense, and I warn you off, for if you kill me you will find that the Vigilantes yet live."

The amazed Gold Wolves fell back at these words, for with their hands upon their weapons they had started forward as though to enter the cabin.

"Come, Spitfire! I want you," cried the Gold King, and with a vicious neigh the splendid horse darted into the cabin.

"Keep your eye on those devils, Spitfire, and spring upon them if they move," and the Gold King pointed to Poker Saul and Toddy Tom over in the corner, and who seemed about to rise.

The intelligent animal gave a low whinny, and advanced toward the two men, who shrunk back, greatly alarmed, for Spitfire was showing his teeth like a dog, and all in Gold Dust knew that he obeyed his master in all things.

Advancing to the bed in one corner, which appeared to hold a form upon it, the Gold King rested his hand upon it an instant, and then, with an imprecation, dragged a bundle of blankets out and walking to the door tossed them out before the amazed Gold Wolves, while he said sternly:

"There is your wounded chief, Major Modoc."

"What does yer mean?" gasped one of the men, and the Gold King saw that they were evidently not in the secret, for their faces showed it.

"I swear that your chief, aided by Poker Saul and one or two others has been playing a deep game upon you, as well as upon me, for he is not here at all, but evidently away on some errand of villainy, as you can see for yourselves," and the Gold King, calling to Spitfire, stepped out of the cabin, and springing into the saddle, a revolver in each hand, gave a low order to the animal, which at once began to back away from the savage and surprised crowd.

As he got a short distance away Poker Saul and Toddy Tom came out of the cabin, and seemed to be urging the band to fire upon the Gold King, who at once came to a halt, as though to await the attack, and in utter defiance of them.

But, seeing that reason rose above temper—for though they might kill the Gold King, the result would be their utter annihilation at the hands of the Vigilantes—and no one was foolish enough to back up Poker Saul, the daring man

turned and rode down the canyon at a gallop, having again added terror to his name by once more bearding the Wolves in their Den.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MEETING AT THE ILL-OMEN MINE.

AFTER leaving the canyon where was the camp of the Gold Wolves, the Gold King rode on at a gallop, taking the trail toward Gold Dust City.

His face wore a stern look, yet in his eyes was a flash of triumph, for he had unearthed, he was confident, an act of villainy, and he did not doubt but that Major Modoc had dogged him to Sunset City, and knowing Luke Lawless to be his manager of the mines there, saw him leave upon the stage coach and had so trailed him to kill and rob him.

Feeling confident that he was on the right track, the Gold King made up his mind to pursue it to the end.

On his way to the Paradise he saw Parson Pete standing on a little hill, which he had pitched upon as the site for his church, and he had with him a number of men whom he had employed to put up the building, which the good parson said should be an ornament to Gold Dust City.

After a few minutes chat with Parson Pete, Montebello rode on to the Paradise, and was met by Señor Señora at the door.

"I am so glad to see you, señor, for I feared that harm would befall you last night," earnestly said the strange young clerk of Colonel Cadaver, holding out his hand in a hesitating, embarrassed way.

"I thank you, señor, for your kind consideration for my welfare; but I had no peril to face upon my way home."

And the Gold King passed on to the room of Cruel Knife Kit and was admitted by a man who had been appointed as nurse to the wounded desperado.

"Well, Kit, how is it with you this morning?" he asked, in a kindly way.

"Helpless as a kitten without claws, Gold King, and sufferin' accordin'," was the response, and the face of the man showed that he suffered.

"I'll soon make you more comfortable, and then the colonel and doctor will dress your wounds for awhile, as I will be called away for a few days."

"I thanks yer, pard, fer what yer has done fer me, and guesses I'll git along until you returns."

And the desperado watched the Gold King as he skillfully dressed his wounds.

Having completed this task Gold King left the room and, after a short talk with Colonel Cadaver, mounted Spitfire and rode away from the Paradise.

He stopped as he came to where the parson was busy, heart, soul and body, in the work of building his chapel, and held a few moments' conversation with him in a low tone, he talking, Parson Pete nodding in a knowing way, and then he started homeward, riding at a swift gallop as though anxious to reach his cabin.

But he did not turn off into the trail leading up to his cabin, but kept on until he came to the canyon where the first scene of this romance opens and where poor Stranger Kit met his death.

A short ride brought him in sight of the cabin of the unfortunate miner, who had lost his life that night at the hand of an unknown assassin, and riding into a thicket near, he left Spitfire while he advanced on foot to the hut.

"Ha! the door is unlocked! what does this mean?" the Gold King said, as he saw that the padlock was out of the staple and the hasp off.

Going with noiseless step up to the door, he halted and listened.

Some one was moving about within; that was certain.

Who could it be? wondered the Gold King, for he had the keys of the cabin which Bugle Bill had intrusted to him, they not having been taken from him with the papers.

He had determined to go on the trail of the one who had attempted to kill Lawless Luke, and as it would carry him down into New Mexico where dwelt Stranger Kit's heiress, he meant first to see that the cabin was as it had been left by the miner, and perhaps there might be something therein to point to the one who had committed the murder.

Visiting the cabin therefore for this purpose, it certainly was a surprise to him to find that it had an occupant.

Whoever was within certainly did not expect to be disturbed, as the cabin was most isolated, and Bugle Bill was the only miner who ever had to pass there in going to his mine, and this he did not often do, as there was another trail by which he could go, only it was a rougher one, though shorter.

Other miners passed by the mouth of the canyon, a quarter of a mile away, in going to their work, but seldom ventured up as far as the isolated house of Stranger Kit.

Drawing his revolver the Gold King stepped close to the door, threw it suddenly open, and sprang within.

A surprised cry, mingled with an oath in a savage voice followed, and there came two pis-

tol-shots in quick succession, followed by a fall and a groan.

A moment after one of the shutters was unfastened from within and thrown open, and the light streamed in through the door and window, revealing the tall form of the Gold King as he stood gazing upon the scene about him.

It was a large cabin, stoutly built of heavy logs, and contained two rooms, the smaller one being in the rear and built against the cliff.

It was rudely furnished with a bed, easy-chair, table, cupboard and shelf of books, the inner room being used as a kitchen and eating-room combined, and having a chair, table, cupboard and cooking utensils.

Bear and other skins were upon the walls, and the dweller there had evidently taken what comfort he could in his lonely life of an exile and hard work.

The larger room was now in disorder, for the cupboard was open, the table upset and blood-stains were upon the floor, along with a rifle and revolver, the latter cocked, but not discharged.

Near the large fireplace lay the form of a man, and a hole in the hearth, where the ashes had been thrust aside, showed that the dead man had been digging there diligently when surprised by the Gold King, for a hatchet was lying on the loose dirt.

The dead man by his dress was a miner.

His face was dark, fierce and covered by a red beard, which like his long auburn hair was unkempt.

A revolver was still grasped in his hand, and another was in his belt, while his bowie had evidently been serving as a spade when he was surprised.

"Red Dick, I knew you would some time catch it, for a greater rogue never lived," muttered the Gold King, recognizing in the man he had slain one of the worst desperadoes of the Gold Wolves' Gang, and one who was known to rob either friend or foe.

"I'll make you serve as a warning to others, who may be tempted to rob this cabin," he continued, and rolling the body in a blanket he dragged it to the door.

Then, with pick and shovel, which he found in one corner of the cabin, the Gold King set to work to dig a grave directly in front of the door.

Having reached the requisite depth, he placed the body within, filled in the grave and rounded it up with the skill of a sexton.

Then he sat down at the table, and with pen, ink and paper which he found there, wrote as follows, in a large hand:

"WARNING!

"Within this grave lies the body of Red Dick, the Desperado.

"Let his fate be a warning to any one who dares attempt to invade the cabin of Stranger Kit, until the year is ended, which was the limit given for the coming of the heir to the Mine of Ill Omen.

"MONTEBELLO, THE GOLD KING."

This placard was tacked securely upon the door, and then the Gold King made a search of the cabin, filling in the hole dug in the hearth, and putting things to rights.

"Now I must return to my home and get ready for my journey, for to-night I start upon the trail of the serpent," he said aloud, and locking up the cabin, and taking with him the skeleton-key, by means of which Red Dick had gained entrance, he mounted Spitfire and rode rapidly away from the Ill-Omen Mine.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HOME OF THE EXILES.

UPON his return to his cabin the Gold King set actively to work to prepare for his trip on the trail of Major Modoc, who he was now assured had been the one to rob Lawless Luke of his papers.

The repeating rifle was put in perfect order, the revolvers in holster and belt carefully cleaned and loaded, and a saddle, which could be transferred into a pack-saddle, was packed with a small tent, *serapes*, extra ammunition and stores, and Spitfire was to be the bearer of these supplies, while Montebello was to ride Mephisto.

After supper with Bugle Bill and some directions to Indigo how to carry the stores to the wounded road-agent in the mountains, the Gold King mounted Mephisto, and calling to Spitfire to follow rode away from the cabin.

The Gold King made his departure by night, for, excepting Colonel Cadaver, Parson Pete and those at his cabin, no one knew he was going, and he did not anticipate meeting any one on the mountain trails after nightfall, as the road-agent Darrell had, by playing ghost, kept the superstitious miners out of the mountains after the setting sun, and they were beginning to dread their own shadows away from Gold Dust City.

So the Gold King rode on his way at an easy pace, and his destination was the home of the exile woman, Stella Estevan and her brother.

Through the night, halting once for a midnight rest and supper, the Gold King held on his way, and shortly after sunrise he again made a stop.

Staking his horses out, he built a fire and

cooked his breakfast, after which he leaned back against the trunk of a tree and enjoyed a cigar with the indifferent air of one who dreaded no danger.

An hour's rest and he was again in the saddle, this time mounted upon Spitfire, to give Mephisto a rest, for the pack saddle did not weigh a hundred pounds.

Several hours longer in the saddle and, following the directions given him by the Señora Estevan, he turned off from the main trail and plunged into the wildest scenes of the mountains.

Still following the map outlined by the strange woman, the Gold King entered a pass through the mountains, which was narrow in the extreme and towered far above his head.

A ride of a mile brought him suddenly out upon the gently sloping side of the mountains, and his eyes fell upon a grand view for miles before him.

A park of magnificent trees grew upon the mountain-side, beginning close to a precipice, and sloped gently down to a river that ran at the base of the foot-hills.

Beyond the stream was a level valley, and cattle were feeding upon it.

There were cattle, mustangs and sheep in sight, and this convinced the Gold King that the home of the señora could not be far away.

"She said that I was to turn to the right after coming out of the pass—ah! there is a column of smoke," and the Gold King rode toward where a cloud of blue smoke was curling upward over a point of the cliff.

Soon he came to an indentation, or cut in the precipice, and a narrow pass between rocks led to it.

It was some dozen acres in size, and an ingeniously constructed gate, that was then open, but could be lowered and form not only a barrier against egress and ingress, but also a good breastwork to serve as a defense.

Across the opening in the cliffs, upon a knoll in the rear were a couple of log cabins and toward these the Gold King rode.

One was large and comfortable, having a piazza, rude though it was at least enjoyable, running across the front.

There were four rooms to the cabin, and around the roof was a breastwork of logs, so that it could be transformed into a fort, and a marksman up there could send a bullet to any part of the inclosure.

The precipice rising above it towered to a great height, and seemed impassable to the foot of man, so there appeared to be no danger of an attack from that quarter.

Behind the large cabin was a smaller one, evidently a stable, and along on one side of the inclosure, which nature had so strangely shut in, was a long row of sheds for cattle.

No one was visible about the place, but as the Gold King approached there suddenly darted out with fierce barking, half a dozen huge and savage dogs.

They seemed about to tear the horse and rider to pieces, when a loud call checked them, and they became at once perfectly quiet.

Turning at the call to the dogs, the Gold King saw the Señora Estevan riding in through the open gate, accompanied by several other canine brutes, and carrying a rifle across her saddle.

A fawn was hung across the back of her horse, and other game was suspended to the saddle-horn.

Instantly the Gold King turned to meet the woman, and raised his hat politely; but she held forth her hand.

"I am glad to see you, señor, and you are welcome to the home of the exiles," she said, pleasantly.

"I am glad to get here, señora, and am anxious to know how poor Luke is."

"Improving steadily, I am glad to say, señor; but I saw you turn into the corral, as we call this natural inclosure, and hastened on to meet you, for I have been hunting the past two hours, and do not leave the Señor Lawless very long at a time."

"And your brother?"

"Is in the valley watching the herds, but will come home to dinner."

"Dismount, please, and stake your horses out, and I will lead you to the Señor Luke."

After looking to the comfort of his horses, the Gold King approached the cabin and was met by Stella Estevan, who had turned her animal loose and taken the game to the kitchen.

The dozen savage dogs about eyed the stranger suspiciously, but made no unfriendly demonstration.

Entering the room on the right, led by his fair hostess, the Gold King beheld Lawless Luke lying upon a cot.

He was very white and feeble, but raised his hand to take the Gold King's, while he smiled faintly and said:

"I knew you would come if you heard how bad off I was."

"You are doing splendidly, Luke, and will pull through all right, so do not worry."

"I expected to find you far worse; but I will have a look at your wounds soon and see if anything can be done for you other than the Señora Estevan has done."

And the Gold King turned to address his hostess, but found that she had left the room.

"These are desperate wounds, Luke, and the wonder is that you survived them, for either one would call in the checks of an ordinary man."

"But they have been cared for with a skill that could not be surpassed, and you owe it to Señora Estevan that you are alive."

"They are healing rapidly and surely, and you are gaining strength, so keep up a good heart."

"But I lost the papers, Mr. Montebello, and that breaks my heart."

"Never mind, for that was not your fault, and I'll guarantee to get them again, or at any rate see that the one to whom they were addressed knows their contents, so do not let that worry you."

"Now tell me, what do you know of this strange lady, for lady she is, that lives here in exile?"

"Her brother has told me that his sister was rich and had a lovely home; but she preferred to give up all and come here to live."

"She had sent men here to build this home, and lives here with only himself and a peon Indian and his squaw, who act as servants."

"They have a snug home, as you see, and enjoy this life, it seems; but I have my ideas that there is some deep mystery about their coming here."

And Lawless Luke no longer talked in the dialect of the mines, while his appearance was that of one who had been reared in refinement whatever might be said of the life he was then leading.

"I believe you are right, Luke, for I too feel that there is some strange mystery connected with the living in this wild way of that fascinating little woman; but now you must talk no more for the present, and, as I remain with you until to-morrow I will find out all about the attack on you, and then know just what to do."

And the Gold King turned, as a tall, handsome youth, clad in buckskin, entered the room and advanced toward him.

"I am Luis Calera, Señor Gold King, and I am happy to meet one who has won such fame upon the border," said the youth in a courtly way, and he grasped the hand of the Gold King, who was as much pleased with his young host, as with his hostess.

After a short general conversation the Señora Estevan announced dinner, and in the afternoon she showed the Gold King over her ranch, and he aided her in driving the cattle into the corral as night drew near, the dogs acting in the place of cowboys.

"Those are my pards, señor, and I have a score of them, as you see, so need dread no surprise by day or night," said the Señora Estevan, as they rode toward the corral.

"Do not the Indians sometimes give you trouble, señora?"

"No, for they have a superstitious dread of me, and the several times that road-agents have come to rob my house, my brother and myself have given them a most salutary lesson."

"And you like this life, may I ask?"

"Far from it, señor, for I was not born to live the life of an exile, away from all that goes to make life enjoyable; but I like this hermit existence far more than the way I would have to live were I in civilization," and the woman's voice was full of sadness as though some bitter memory swept over her of the bygone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DOGGED TO DEATH.

THE morning after the meeting of Don Díaz with Major Modoc, at the Domingo Inn, two horsemen rode out of the walled yard of the Murillo home in the town, and wended their way through the deserted streets toward the outskirts of the town.

One of these two horsemen rode in advance, the other following at a respectful distance, as though a servant.

The one leading wore a cloak, and his large-brimmed sombrero was drawn far down over his eyes.

The dawn was just breaking, and yet another person was visible in the streets, skulking in the shadow of a row of trees near the Murillo home, and apparently watching the two horsemen.

That this was the case seemed certain, when, after they had ridden by, he slowly followed them until he saw the trail they took.

Then he struck off in a run up the street and never stopped until he reached the Domingo Inn.

He was admitted at once, and, as Major Modoc was just turning over for a comfortable morning nap, before rising, he heard a loud knock upon his door.

The one who entered was the man who had dogged the steps of the two horsemen leaving the house of Don Díaz.

"Well?" abruptly asked the miner.

"I watched the place, señor, all night, and half an hour ago the Don and a servant rode out of the yard, and—"

"Already?"

"Yes, señor."

"You followed them?"

"As you ordered, señor, to see which trail they took, and then I ran here in all haste to tell you."

"You have done well; but which trail did they take?"

"To the north, señor—the one known as the Colorado trail."

"Well, my man, I wish your services still further, as I told you I would last night."

"Here is gold for you, so go out and buy you a good horse and outfit, and join me here in an hour or two."

"Yes, señor."

The man, who was a Mexican, and one who looked as though he might be volunteer for any work that brought gold, no matter what its nature, disappeared, while Modoc quietly dressed himself in a serviceable suit of buckskin, which he had purchased.

His other things he made up in a package, to leave with the Señor Domingo for future use, when he should again visit the town, after he had carried out his threat of getting rid of Don Diaz, and then secured quarters for the Señora Kittredge at Puebla, as he had promised her that he would.

After a hearty breakfast—for Major Modoc was in excellent humor—he called for his horse and rode away from the inn, having paid Domingo most liberally.

As he departed, the Mexican, Andros, came riding down a side street, passed him without a word and took the trail which the two horsemen had taken in the morning, Modoc now becoming the follower.

Once away from the town, Modoc overtook the Mexican and said:

"You are all prepared for the trip, Andros?"

"Yes, señor."

"You supplied yourself with provisions?"

"Yes, señor."

"That is a good horse, Andros."

"He is indeed, señor."

"Well, I see no reason why we should not push on rapidly and overtake those ahead where they camp to-night, for their trail is well marked."

"I am your servant, señor," was the quiet response.

"I suppose you obey orders for gold?"

"Yes, señor."

"I hope you know how to keep a secret?"

"I do, señor."

"I need just such a man as you are; serve me faithfully, Andros, and you shall have plenty of gold; but betray me in any way, and I'll give you cold steel or lead just as generously."

"I understand you, señor, and you may depend upon me in everything."

"We shall see," was the reply of Modoc, and he urged his horse into a gallop, the Mexican following his example.

Halting half an hour for rest and dinner they again pressed forward, following the trail of the two men whom they were dogging to their death, and just at sunset, upon riding to the top of a hill they spied them in advance a mile distant, riding toward a pine thicket with the evident intention of going into camp for the night.

"We have them now, Andros," grimly said Major Modoc, as he drew hastily back out of sight.

Dismounting, he threw his rein to the Mexican and then, through a small field-glass, watched the two horsemen, until they disappeared from sight in the timber.

Soon after a column of smoke arose above the tops of the pines, and the miner said:

"Now we can ride on slowly, Andros, and halt near their camp."

"Yes, señor; but does the señor wish to attack them?"

"Yes."

"Don Diaz is a dangerous man, señor."

"So am I," was the grim reply.

"He is a dead shot, señor, and a terrible man in a combat, for all of his quiet looks."

"I do not intend to give him a chance to harm us, Andros."

"Ah!"

"Yes, I shall put a bullet through his heart with my rifle, and you can do likewise for his servant."

"His servant is kinsman of mine, señor."

"What matters it, where you get gold?"

"I'd rather not kill poor Pulco, señor."

"Are you a good shot?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then you will kill the Don and I'll kill your kinsman."

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders, and then said:

"I am your servant, señor, and can but obey."

"Do not miss, Andros, for I would be very angry, and I get violent if disappointed."

"You may depend upon me, señor, for though I love my kinsman, I love gold more, and the Don I care not for."

The miner had evidently studied the locality of the pine thicket, through his glass, for upon approaching a ravine, which the trail crossed over a rude log bridge, he turned abruptly to

the right without crossing, and followed the bank until it wound around the base of a precipitous hill.

Here he stopped and the horses were hitched in a small cove, as it were, of the cliff.

The ravine was very deep, perhaps a hundred feet, for the bottom could not be seen in the darkness.

It was about forty feet wide, and a few paces from the other bank the pine thicket began.

Up through the trees and within seventy yards of where the miner and Mexican were standing, was the camp-fire of the two men, and seated before it, cooking their supper, they were seemingly unsuspecting of danger.

Along the brink of the ravine-bank grew a stunted pine, and here Modoc stationed the Mexican, with the remark:

"Andros, rest your rifle on this tree so as to steady your aim, and make no mistake, for the Don is your game."

"And you, señor?"

"Will take your kinsman; but I need no rest, other than I can get by dropping upon one knee."

"Yes, señor."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, señor; but poor Pulco?"

"I'll give you gold to offer up a mass for his soul, and it's more than you'll get yourself, unless you die in my service, and I never forget a trusty servant."

The two men now took up their positions, the Mexican resting his rifle in the crotch of the dwarfed tree, and the miner dropping upon one knee by his side.

"I will give the order, 'One, two, three—fire!'"

"When I say 'fire!' pull trigger, and be sure you have dead aim."

"Yes, señor."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, señor."

"No limb or twig between to destroy your aim."

"No, señor," said the Mexican, carefully sighting his gun.

"Well, I—"

"But, señor, Pulco is harmless, so suppose we drop the Don and let him go."

"No; I want no witnesses of how Don Diaz died."

"Except myself, señor."

"Yes; but you are his murderer, or will be, so I do not mind you."

"Yes, señor."

"Now, are you ready?"

"Yes, señor."

"One, two, three—fire!"

The rifles flashed together, and then, the instant following, came a startled cry, mingling with a bitter oath, and it broke from the lips of Major Modoc, the miner, for affairs had turned out differently from what he had expected.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FATAL SHOTS.

WHEN Modoc, the miner, gave the order to fire, he was crouching on one knee by the side of Andros, the Mexican, whose gun rested upon the limb of the stunted pine, which grew up from a crevice on the very edge of the cliff.

The moment that the rifles flashed, the Mexican suddenly let fall his rifle and gave Major Modoc a violent shove which sent him headlong over the precipice.

It was then that the wild cry broke from his lips, mingled with an oath, as the miner felt that he had been dealt treacherously with and hurled to his death by the Mexican.

So violent had been the shove the Mexican gave that he nearly lost his balance and went over, too, but recovering himself by catching on a limb of the stunted pine, he sprang back from danger and sunk, trembling with fright at his narrow escape, upon the rocky trail.

An instant he rested there to recover his nerve, and then, springing to his feet, he darted away, mounted his horse, and leading the animal ridden by the miner, rode away from the dread spot, seemingly anxious to get distance between himself and the scene.

While riding along the words that he muttered to himself showed just why he had proven treacherous, for he said:

"Now the Señor Domingo will pay me well for my work, and the horse will be mine, too; so this is not a bad two days' work, Andros."

"I may or may not have killed with my shot, but I'm not the man to go and see, for unless he's store dead Don Diaz is wounded, and that looked like Fighting Frank, the chief of his *vaqueros*, with him, so I'm off to report to the Señor Domingo and get my reward for killing the stranger."

So saying the Mexican assassin rode away in the darkness, too well satisfied with his deadly work to tarry longer in such a dangerous vicinity.

Had he been able to pierce the gloom below, however, he would not have appeared so contented, for his victim was not dead as he had supposed.

Growing out of a crevice in the cliff, some forty feet below the top, was a stout cedar tree, its branches being thick with foliage.

Into this the miner had dashed in his downward flight, and grasping the branches with the strength of despair held on, though the tree bent fearfully and the roots seemed to snap under the strain.

Finding that he was safe, however, in spite of the scratches he had received, he held on in perfect silence, expecting that his enemy would hear his crashing among the branches and look over.

Gazing up toward the sky, Modoc could have seen the head of the Mexican, had he looked over the cliff, and he drew a revolver and waited, and it was well for the traitor that he had no curiosity to gaze down into the dark abysses.

Waiting until he heard the Mexican ride away the miner then started to crawl down to the trunk of the tree, and discover if he could find any way to get out of his dangerous situation.

His first movement, however, caused a snapping of the roots, and downward the top of the tree swept, but he gave a sigh of relief as he found that the base of the tree had not fully torn away from its hold, only the roots which had held it upright.

The tree now was hanging downward, and still clinging at its base, and Major Modoc was holding on with a tenacity that showed he well knew that his life depended upon it.

As his eyes became more accustomed to the darkness down in the ravine he thought that he could see bottom.

Then a sound reached his ears and he listened.

It was the gurgling of water.

Lowering himself by the branches, he soon found that his feet touched bottom, and for the first time in many years he uttered something very like a prayer.

Gazing about him he found that he was in the bottom of the ravine, and that a small stream flowed down it.

His foot struck something that rattled, and stooping, he found it to be his rifle, shivered to atoms.

Going up the ravine, feeling his way slowly along, he, after a long walk, gradually ascending, came to the bridge, where the trail led across.

Here the ravine was little more than a deep ditch, and he managed to get out and stand once more in the trail.

Going down the bank, where he and the Mexican had turned off, he sought the place where he had fired upon the Don and his servant.

To his chagrin his horse was gone, but he found the rifle the Mexican had dropped, and seizing it with a cry of delight, he turned his gaze upon the pine thicket beyond.

The camp-fire blazed cheerily in the timber, but no forms were visible.

"The Mexican traitor was doubtless the friend of Don Diaz, and has gone to the camp to tell him how well he ended my life."

"Thither I shall go too, for though he missed the Don, I did not miss his servant, I am sure, and they will doubtless delay to bury him, and perhaps await the coming of day to see how badly broken up I was by my fall."

"But I shall thwart their little game, and believing me to be dead, the Don and that treacherous Mexican will not be looking out for me, so I think I have things pretty much my own way."

So saying the miner shouldered the rifle and started on his way for the pine thicket.

Crossing the log bridge, he skirted the pines until he could approach the camp-fire from the opposite direction.

Reaching the base of a hill, he entered the timber and cautiously made his way, from tree to tree, nearer to the fire.

As noiselessly as an Indian he made his way, his rifle grasped ready for instant use.

Suddenly he halted, for he saw an object before him that riveted his gaze.

An instant he regarded it, and then moved forward once more, muttering:

"It is their horses; but there are but two."

"Can the Mexican have come here after all?"

Again he moved forward in the same cautious manner.

The camp-fire was now not far distant, and its light was dying out.

The flickering blaze made the huge shadows of the trees dance about like black specters, but it revealed no human form.

Nearer and nearer the miner crept, until he stood within twenty feet of the fire.

Here he halted, for his eyes fell upon two human forms.

One was lying prostrate upon the ground, the other leaning against a tree.

"This can be no trap, for they must believe me dead, if the Mexican came here," muttered Major Modoc.

Gazing attentively at them for some time he again said:

"They are dead, and both the Mexican's shot and mine took effect."

"But where can the Mexican be?"

"After all he could not have been acting for Don Diaz, and he may be lurking about here looking for me; but I forget that he must believe me dead."

"I will venture and see just what this means."

So saying he stepped quickly forward, his rifle ready, and reached the side of the prostrate forms.

Bending over them he glanced earnestly at the one and then at the other.

Then he threw fresh fuel upon the fire, and as it blazed up brightly, he said aloud:

"Yes, they are both dead!

"But, great God! *this man is not Don Diaz the ranchero, whom I thought I was tracking to his death!*"

CHAPTER XXX.

MAJOR MODOC'S RESOLVE.

It was certainly a startling surprise to Major Modoc, when he bent over the bodies of the two men, whose steps he had dogged, to discover that the one whom he had surely believed to be Don Diaz Murillo was not that personage by any means.

Had the Mexican played him false in this also, and put him on a false scent, or had he really believed those in the advance, in the ride from the town, to be Don Diaz, the Mexican ranchero, and his servant?

This question the miner could not of course answer, and he stood in deep meditation, gazing down at the bodies.

The one he had supposed to be the Don was tall, and certainly resembled him in a marked degree, but it was not the ranchero, that was certain.

What the motive of Andros had been, in being willing to fire upon the two men, and then hurling him over the precipice, the miner could not imagine, for the treacherous Mexican had certainly decamped, and, though knowing that those they had fired upon must be dead, he had gone off without robbing their bodies, as it would be supposed such a wretch would do.

"Well, it is not the Don, that is certain; nor is it his brother, the Padre Fanchon, though the dead man resembles them, at least in form and carriage.

"Yet it can be but an accidental likeness, and the Don has doubtless suspected me and started this man and his attendant off, that I might be deceived and follow them, while he coolly departed by another trail.

"Now to see just what these bodies will pan out, and the Miner Desperado bent over the body of the man who had so resembled Don Diaz.

"Ah! a servant's rig under this caballero costume; this tells the secret of how the Don sought to fool me, and did, not caring whether I killed his servants or not, so that I did not dog his trail.

"Well, he has evidently started for the Mine of Ill-Omen by another trail; but it will never do for him to get there.

"Fortunately I have two good horses here, and I can press on rapidly, while he will hardly travel fast, and once I reach Gold Dust City before him, he will never marry the fair Kate Kittredge.

"If he should get there ahead of me, I will soon end his career, and then it will be time for me to go to the Mission Hacienda and steal away the señorita.

"I can take her to Puebla, get her authority to act for her in the mine she has inherited from her father, and then she must become my wife, when I will have all my own way.

"Now to get away from here as soon as possible."

Examining the bodies of the dead the miner found but little money upon them, but this was quietly appropriated, along with the handsome suit worn by the impersonator of Don Diaz, and which had cost him his life.

The supplies, blankets and arms of the victims were also tied up, and then the miner strapped the bundle upon the saddle of one of the horses, and mounting the other rode out of the thicket.

He found the animals good travelers, and held on at a good pace until he had put many a mile between himself and the spot which had so nearly proven fatal to him.

Modoc was a thorough trailer, and few men knew the country better than he did, so that he was at little loss to find his way.

Shortly before dawn he came to a halt, seeking a camping-place in a sheltered spot, and utterly worn out by his long ride and what he had passed through, he was soon fast asleep, while his horses, staked out near, also were glad to lie down to rest.

The sun was high in the heavens when he awoke, feeling refreshed, but very stiff, for he had not escaped unbruised in his fall, and his face and hands were badly scratched up by the brambles, so that he looked as though he had had an encounter with a wild-cat.

After cooking and eating his breakfast he again mounted and pressed on his way, the hardy animals seeming not to be wearied by their long jaunt of the day and night before.

Thus the miner pushed on his way, resting his horses by riding them alternately, at times walking, and halting a few hours only at night and by day, instead of camping through the entire hours of darkness.

At last he drew near to Gold Dust City, and came to a halt, for it was a couple of hours to

sunset, and he had no desire to enter that wild encampment in daylight.

As soon as it grew dark, however, he mounted and pressed on.

The trail took him by the path that led up to the cabin of the Gold King, and seeing lights glimmering in the windows, he muttered:

"The Magnificent is at home; but he shall not thwart me in my purpose."

As he turned into the valley road that led up to Gold Dust City, he said:

"I wonder if Poker Saul has kept up the plot of my being supposed to be lying seriously wounded?"

"If Toddy Tom and Benzine Bob have been given plenty to drink in the cabin, and have not had to go down to the town to get it, I guess all has gone well, and I hope it has, for I don't wish the men to know that I deceived them.

"Well, here goes for the canyon, and I hope the boys have gone to bed, for I wish to see no one."

Entering the canyon, the miner rode on his way, passing cabins that were without a light, which showed that the inmates had retired, and others from which came the sound of voices in rude converse and boisterous laughter.

One man passed him on foot and gazed hard at him, but neither spoke, and Major Modoc reached his cabin unknown.

The sound of deep snoring reached his ears, and he knocked at the door, when a deep voice asked:

"Who's thar?"

"Ho, Poker Saul, let me in."

There was a stir within, and then the door opened and Poker Saul appeared.

"Lor' bless you, Cap, it are you," he said.

"Yes; get me something to drink and to eat, for I are as hungry as a b'ar and will be in soon as I put my critters up," said Modoc, using the border dialect again, now that he was in camp.

"I'll do it, and we'll have a talk over things in gin'ral."

Modoc unsaddled his horses, and putting the saddles in the cabin led the animals away to the corral near by.

Then he returned to the cabin and found that Poker Saul had set out a black bottle and tin cup, while he was cooking a steak and some coffee for his chief.

"It's some o' Kernal Cadaver's best, major, so take a nip for a appetizer, and yer supper will soon be ready; but whar has yer been?"

"First tell me," said Modoc, as he dashed off a drink of liquor, "whether it is known that I was not seriously wounded?"

"It are."

"Did Toddy Tom or Benzine Bob give it away?"

"Nuther o' them."

"How did it become known?"

"Ther Gold King jist let ther cat out o' ther bag."

"Ther Gold King!" cried Modoc, in surprise.

"Yas."

And Poker Saul told the story of how the Gold King had come to the camp and exposed the cheat.

"Why didn't you kill him, Saul?" sternly said Modoc.

"Why didn't *you* kill him, Modoc, when he came arter them papers thet day, and got 'em?"

Modoc winced, but asked other questions, until Poker Saul told him all that had occurred and how they tried to put the murder of Gringo and the wounding of himself—Modoc—upon the Gold King, and all that followed.

"And he got away with Cruel Kit?"

"For sart'in."

"Saul, that man must die."

"Yas, pard."

"I kin help you well, Saul, to git rich, if you'll help me."

"I'll do it."

"I intend to git married—"

"Lordy!"

"It is true, and there's lots o' money in it, so I kin help yer; but, Saul, the Gold King must go under, and thar is one other has got ter die."

"Who are thet?"

"Have you heard of any stranger arriving in the city?"

"No."

"No one to claim the Ill-Omen Mine?"

"Not one."

"Well, thar'll be a feller along, and he's got to be done fer."

"As you says, Modoc."

"You help me, Saul, and I'll make a rich man of you."

"I'll do it."

"Then to-morrow we'll begin to play our leetle game, and we'll get rid o' ther Gold King, and—"

"He are not here."

"Not at his cabin?"

"No, he hev gone away somewhar."

"Whar?"

"Dunno."

"Don't you know which trail he took?"

"South."

"By Heaven! he may have gone on my trail;

but he can do nothing, I am confident, to thwart my resolve to marry that girl," and these words the Chief of the Gold Wolves uttered aloud, but they were not addressed to Poker Saul, who said nothing more, but saw that Modoc was in deadly earnest to carry out some bold plan he had formed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GUARD OF THE GOLD TRAIL.

"SAUL, can I trust you?" asked Major Modoc, the morning after his return to his cabin, as the two sat at breakfast.

"You bet you kin, pard."

"I hope so, Saul."

"Hain't I showed it?"

"Yas, you hev."

"Waal, out with it, fer I sees yer hes some game ter play, and I judges that yer holds trump keards, as yer rings low when yer hasn't got a good hand."

"I kin make dust fer yer in one clip, Saul."

"I'm yer attached friend, pard Modoc."

"I dare not trust others, and besides, many hands to receive make small perquisites."

"We kin git away with it all, pard."

"It may cause some killin' ter be did."

"I hain't ther man ter faint at sight o' blood."

"Now I have been down in New Mexico."

"Yas."

"I guesses yer hain't forgot them papers ther Gold King called fer one day."

"No, and got 'em too."

"He did; but I know'd about ther contents of 'em, and seen who they was directed to, so I went ter New Mexico and made a leetle call on ther gal."

"Old Stranger Kit's darter, maybe?"

"Yas, and I found her ther same as a prisoner in ther hands o' a rich ranchero, who intends ter marry her if he hes his way."

"She don't like him, so I shall go in to win ther gal, while he are now on ther way here, maybe with one, perhaps with two or more pards, ter claim ther mines o' Stranger Kit."

"They must be walu'ble."

"They is."

"I kinder hed thet idee, pard."

"As the guardian o' ther girl this ranchero comes here ter take hold o' ther mines."

"He mustn't hev them."

"By no means."

"He are coming now yer say?"

"Yes, and may be here to-night or to-morrow, as he will be due then, if he came on slowly, for I hev a mind thet he left arter I did, and I didn't let no grass grow under my horses while comin'."

"You looks as though yer hed been in a row with wildcats, pard."

"I had a fall into the top of a tree, and got scratched up."

"Yer wasn't up in no balloon, were yer?"

"No, I went over a cliff."

"I sees; yer were lucky ter strike ther tree."

"I was; but now to this ranchero."

"I is all ears, pard."

"Stranger Kit, I knows, has more than the Ill-Omen Mine."

"Is thet so?"

"It is, for he hes one up in ther road-agents' mountains, and I wish you to strike ther trail of it."

"It are said thet Red Darrell's ghost ha'nts them hills and canyons," said Poker Saul, with a shudder.

"Is you afraid o' ghosts?"

"Waal, I doesn't like 'em, pard."

"Then I will try and strike Stranger Kit's gold trail, and leave you to gettin' rid o' ther ranchero."

"I'd rather tackle flesh and bone, pard."

"But you know the mountain trails well, and you do not know the ranchero, while I do."

"I wish you'd try and find Kit's other mine, Saul."

"I'll do it, fer maybe I won't see Darrell's ghost, and I guesses I kin git out if I does."

"Well, you start for the mountains to-day, and lay your trail from Kit's cabin, and I guess you kin foller it to his secret mine."

"Go prepared for a thorough search, and I will look after the ranchero, and whoever he may bring with him, so by ther time you comes back we'll hev nothin' ter fear from him."

"If you finds ther mine, and I tarns up the ranchero's toes, all I hes ter do then is ter marry ther gal, bring her here ter claim ther mine, and you and I is fixed fer life, for I'll give you a fortin'."

"Waal, Modoc, I'm yer man, so I strikes at once fer ther mount'ins," and half an hour after the two villains rode down the canyon together.

As Modoc was recognized by the Gold Wolves whom he met, they gave him a warm greeting, and were glad to see him back again, as the band had really no head then.

As to his strategy, in pretending to be seriously wounded, and which the Gold King had exposed, they did not care; but they were interested in knowing what would follow the meeting of their chief and Montebello, and a score of

warnings were called after the miner chief, all having the same tenor:

"Luk out fer ther Gold King, pard, for he are on ther war-path wuss nor a wolf."

Arriving at the valley trail, which ran into Gold Dust City, and also back into the mountains, Major Modoc went on his way toward the Paradise Hotel, while Poker Saul started toward the cabin of Stranger Kit, a foreboding in his heart of evil, and feeling a preference for the work his companion had cut out for himself, rather than to invade the territory where it was said Red Darrell's ghost held sway.

Turning into the canyon Poker Saul rode on until he came to the cabin of Stranger Kit.

He was the first person to visit since the departure of the Gold King, who had left such a marked souvenir of his having been there.

Few miners cared to go near the Ill-Omen Mine, even before the death of Stranger Kit; but after his murder, they shunned the dread spot more than ever.

As he came in sight of the grave directly before the door, Poker Saul drew rein with a suddenness that showed he was startled.

It seemed for an instant his intention of turning to the rightabout and plying his spurs in flight.

But he checked this desire and slowly rode up to the door.

He carefully read the placard there and then glanced down at the grave.

"Waal, it are Red Dick that lies under ther ground here, and ther Gold King hev kilt him, writ his obituary and give a warnin' ter others in gin'ral."

"I has half-way hinted ter myself that I w'u'd s'arch this cabin some day, and I intended ter do it ter-day, but I hain't a bit anxious ter do it now, so won't tarry in a deestrick whar it hain't healthy fer Gold Wolves."

"Red Dick hev departed this life, and I hain't sorry; but ef ther Gold King hain't put under ground soon he'll hev a graveyard o' his own, and ther reserved seats will be for our band."

"I will not tarry here any longer, fer somehow I feel as though he were lookin' arter me now."

And Poker Saul rode on up the canyon and climbing the steep trail soon found himself in the mountains.

Here he stopped to rest his horse and to eat his dinner, while he meditated upon where Stranger Kit's secret mine could be.

"He never fellered no reg'lar way long enough to make a trail of it to and from the mine; but he hed ter come this way, and I sees that thar is several leetle trails leadin' further on inter the mountains, so I will foller each one of 'em, and see ef they doesn't come together ag'in, a mile or so off."

Leaving his horse staked out Poker Saul followed a trace of a trail, for it was nothing more, and after a long jaunt saw that it ended at the base of a cliff.

A careful search showed several other faintly marked paths coming in there and diverging in different directions.

Taking one of these he started upon his return, and after several miles came out at the spot where he had left his horse.

"Now fer a third one," he muttered, and leading his horse he started again to follow a third of the faintly-marked trails, and which were really so slight that only the most skilled frontiersman could have found them.

Just at sunset this third path brought him out at the cliff, and he muttered:

"Thet Stranger Kit were a sly one, and no mistake."

"He hed a dozen ways o' comin' ter his secret mine, so that he didn't take any one o' 'em but once a week, and so left no trail to speak of."

"I thinks I is right now, though how to git up that cliff are ther question," and he looked up the face of the cliff, which towered some fifty feet above him.

"With a stone hitched ter ther end of a lariat I might throw it over ther p'int o' rocks and then climb up, and from ther marks on ther side o' ther cliff 'pears ter me that were ther leetle game o' Stranger Kit ter git thar."

"Waal, I'll camp right here, and in ther mornin' try that plan."

"Now fer some supper," and Poker Saul set to work to cook a hearty meal, for he was a man that was always hungry.

Staking his horse out near, after watering him at a rivulet, he gathered some sticks of wood and soon had a cheerful fire burning in a crevice of the rocks, where the reflection could not be seen at any distance.

Broiling a bird upon the coals and an antelope steak, he ate with a relish, washing them down with a cup of coffee, and crackers serving for bread.

Placing his blankets in a snug niche of the rocks, he then sat down to smoke his pipe, and was deep in the enjoyment of this when a burst of wild laughter broke upon his ears.

Poker Saul was upon his feet with an alacrity that was surprising, and he stood trembling in every limb.

An instant of suspense, and once more came that burst of wild laughter.

"Red Darrell's ghost! no human c'u'd laff like that with nothin' ter amoose 'em thet I kin diskiver," he said through his chattering teeth.

Then Poker Saul looked up the bold face of the cliff, as though striving to escape that way.

But that was impossible, and he crouched down by his fire, throwing his folded blanket over it to smother the flame, while he muttered:

"Maybe he can't find me now."

But as though to give the lie to his hopes, again was heard the mocking laughter, and it sounded nearer than before.

"Thet's him, fer ther boys says as hes heerd him, thet he is allus laffin', though it hain't funny fer me."

Suddenly a startled snort came from the miner's horse, followed by a trampling of hoofs, and then the clatter as though the animal had been frightened, dragged up his lariat stake and run off.

"Ther critter hev gone, and I are afoot," groaned Poker Saul, and then, as though no longer able to stand the agony of his situation, he dashed out of the crevice in the rocks, bearing his blankets and his stores, just as the flames burst through the blanket and revealed to him the tall, weird-looking form of a man standing on a rock above, and looking down upon him.

Poker Saul had seen Red Darrell the road-agent in life, having twice been robbed by him, and in the one he now beheld even a glance showed him such a striking resemblance to that knight of the Overland, that he could not but believe that he looked upon his ghost.

With a wild yell of terror he darted away from the dread spot, and sped down the mountain-side at a speed that would have distanced a deer.

Once he looked over his shoulder to behold, in the full glare of the firelight below him, the ghostly form standing on the cliff, and this but added wings to his feet, and he kept on, bounding from rock to rock, rushing down a steep ascent here, leaping a rivulet there, until he reached the canyon in which stood Stranger Kit's cabin.

But, panting like a hard-run hound, he did not stop, and, without daring to glance at the cabin, he bounded by, and pressed on until he fell exhausted as he turned into the Overland trail.

Here he lay until he got back his breath, and then walked rapidly on once more, arriving at Modoc's cabin unable to speak for want of breath, and in a frame of mind that was fearful.

His horse was there, and looked as though he had run all the way back; but Poker Saul was too much hard up to look after the animal, and entering the cabin threw himself down upon his bed utterly prostrated and still badly frightened.

Just as he did so there came the sound of hoofs outside and a moment after the door was dashed open and in stalked Major Modoc.

One glance at his chief and Poker Saul saw that he too had had passed through a scene that he had not wholly enjoyed.

"You here?" thundered Modoc.

"I are, thank God!"

"Why are you not in the mountains where you started this morning?"

"I were there, but yer hasn't dust enough ter make me go ag'in, fer I seen Red Darrell's ghost," was the low reply, and Poker Saul shuddered as he recalled what he had seen in the mountains, while Modoc threw himself angrily into a chair, his brow dark and eyes flashing with some emotion that possessed him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TWO DISGUISES.

AFTER a short stay with the mysterious exiles, Stella Estevan and her brother Luis Calera, the Gold King felt that he could thoroughly trust them, and so he told them the story of Stranger Kit's murder, the papers found in his hand, and what was to be done with them.

"Now," he continued, "I am not sure that this Modoc, the Gold Wolves' chief, knew either Stranger Kit or his daughter; but he evidently suspected that the miner left a fortune, from his determined efforts to get hold of the papers."

"He first made an effort to take them, instead of Bugle Bill, and failing, tried to kill that young miner to get possession of them."

"The papers he got, but Bugle Bill is by no means dead."

"Then, I am sure it was he who rode away from Sunset City with Luke here, pretending to be an aged miner, and he again tried to commit murder to get the papers."

"He did kill the stage-driver, but Lawless Luke's time had not come, and he'll live to see Modoc hanged, if I have my way."

"His playing the deep game that he was wounded, was to allow him to start on his journey to New Mexico, and he got his gang to give out that I had wounded him and killed Gringo, in the hope that the Gold Wolves would end my days."

"Now, I discovered that Modoc was not in his den, and I am sure that he is in New Mexico, playing some devilish game to get possession of Stranger Kit's mines, and perhaps

against the Sefiorita Kittredge herself, and it is my intention to thwart him, but I need your aid, Sefior Luis," and the Gold King turned to Luis Calera.

"I am at your service, sefior," was the ready answer, while the Sefiora Stella said:

"I am sure that my brother, or myself, will do all in our power to aid you, sefior."

"You are very kind; but could you spare the Sefior Luis for some days?"

"Certainly, for the Sefior Luke is improving rapidly, and my servants can take care of him by day, while I look after the cattle and the ranch."

"Then, Sefior Luis, I will ask you to accompany me to the town, near where the Sefiorita Kittredge dwells, and if I am not mistaken we can help her out of a desperate situation, for this desperado, Modoc, will stop at nothing to gain his ends."

Then followed a longer conversation regarding what was best to be done, and the next morning the Gold King rode away from the Exile's Ranch accompanied by Luis Calera, and with Spittire and a fine mustang belonging to the young ranchero following as pack-horses, and supplied with all that was needed for their trip, while the pack of one of the animals hid the lady's saddle that was upon him.

The following night, after dark, the Gold King and his young companion rode up to the Domingo Inn and were at once shown to the rooms which had been occupied by Major Modoc, for Montebello had ordered the best, and thrust several gold-pieces into the servant's hand that there would be no mistake about it.

The Sefior Domingo saw the servant counting his gold, and finding out thus the liberality of his guests, at once sought their rooms.

As he entered, the landlord suddenly came to a halt as his eyes fell upon the magnificent form of the Gold King standing by the window.

"The Sefior Montebello!" he cried, in amazement.

"Yes, Domingo; I am again in your town, and you see that I have not forgotten to come to your inn."

And the Gold King grasped the landlord's extended hand.

"Oh, sefior! but I am so glad to look on your face again, for I have not forgotten all that I owe you—"

"Sh! Domingo, you need not refer to the past, for my work now is with the future, and I wish your aid."

"You shall have it, sefior, from my gold to my life, if need be."

"I need neither the one nor the other, Domingo; but this is my young friend, the Sefior Luis, and you must treat him as though he were my brother."

"I will, sefior."

"Now, Domingo, I do not wish to be known in this town, and a false gray beard and wig with a miner's suit would disguise me."

"It would, sefior."

"You can get what I need?"

"Yes, sefior."

"And the Sefior Luis is anxious to turn padre."

"A gay-looking padre he'll make with his fine eyes, sefior."

"He can subdue his looks, Domingo, and, in the garb of a padre, will look what he wishes to impersonate, while, as he was intended for the priesthood and understands the duties, he can readily pass even among those of the cloth, so just tell him what place in old Mexico he can hail from, whose priests are little known."

"The Mission Miguel, sefior, and they have young priests there, for there, in fact, I have a son who is a padre."

"Then the Padre Domingo he is, and your son he shall be to all."

"You have but to command, sefior," was the humble reply of the landlord.

"Has your son ever been here, Domingo?"

"No, sefior, nor do I wish him to come, as I have no desire to go to the confessional in which sits my own son."

"Doubtless; but what is his name?"

"He is known as the Padre Prevost."

"All right, we'll tack that name onto the Sefior Luis, instead of that of Domingo."

"Now go and get our disguises, and see to it that no one knows us to be other than we appear."

"I am, you know, to be the guide of the young Padre Prevost, who is here on a visit to his good father."

"Yes, sefior."

"And, Domingo!"

"Sefior!"

"I wish the Padre Prevost to make the acquaintance of the family in which dwells the Sefiorita Kate Kittredge, if you know such a person."

"Yes, sefior, I do; but she lives leagues away from town."

"Ah! it matters not, so that you know where?"

"She dwells at the Mission Hacienda, or Chapel Ranch, for it is called both, and there live also the Padre Panchon and his two sisters, the Sister Terese and Sister Serene."

"It is a convent then?"

"No, señor, and yes, for it is presided over by Padre Fanchon, and his sisters, though there is a large retinue of servants, the Hacienda is very grand, and it is whispered that the trio of *religieuses* live a life of luxury mixed with prayers."

"And the Señorita Kittredge is in their keeping?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then our course is plain, Domingo, and with your aid all will come well, so at once secure the disguises that will metamorphose us into the Padre Prevost and Monté the Guide, for by such name am I to be known."

"Yes, señor," and the landlord departed upon his mission muttering:

"The Señor Montebello is playing some deep game, and the Señorita Kittredge is at the bottom of it."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PLOT OF THE GOLD KING.

EVERY one about the Domingo Inn seemed to like the young Padre Prevost.

He had been invited to visit the padres of the town, at their Mission, but said that he preferred to remain with his father.

His guide, Monté, was a man of few words, and his stern face forbade familiarity, but he was always with the pretended young priest, and many spoke of his great devotion to him.

One day the Padre Fanchon came to the inn to dinner, as his brother Don Diaz, was absent from home, and he did not care to dine alone at the mansion.

He was at once presented by Domingo to his son, as it had been agreed that he should call the young priest, and the two seemed to affiliate at once, and when the Padre Fanchon left for his home, he had received a promise from the Padre Prevost that he would visit him at Mission Hacienda for a few days.

"I will have to bring my guide with me," the supposed young priest had said, and Padre Fanchon returned:

"By all means, for I like your guide immensely, and he shall be well treated."

The result of this invitation was that two days after the Padre Prevost and Monté the Guide rode away from the Domingo Inn, and took the trail to the Mission Hacienda.

"Well, Luis, we have played our cards well so far, and it remains for us to see what we can do at the Hacienda," said the Gold King, as he rode along with the young ranchoero, after leaving the Domingo Inn.

In his garb of a padre no one would have recognized the young Luis Calera any more than they would the handsome Gold King, in his buckskin suit, long flowing white beard and gray wig, which looked most natural, aided as they were by a silk scarf about the neck, and a very broad-brimmed sombrero that shaded the face completely.

"I think that we can accomplish all that you have set out to do, Señor Montebello," answered Luis Calera.

"I do not intend to fail, and, from what I have learned in the town, the Señorita Kittredge is held almost as a prisoner in the Mission Hacienda, and the Don intends to make her his wife."

"He has gone away, no one knows exactly where, and it will be a good time for us to act, for, if the señorita is unhappy where she is, I shall take her away, and somehow I feel that she is."

"That Major Modoc has been here is certain, for he was the Señor Moreau who stopped with Domingo, and from what the landlord told me confidentially, we have nothing more to fear."

"That would seem, in my mind, that your man Modoc was dead."

"About that, Luis, for Domingo is no man to fool with, as he is a secret actor, not an open one, and Modoc began by frightening him, saying that he was a Secret Service man, and if the landlord did not serve him he would put him behind iron bars, or worse."

"Now, Domingo is by no means a saint, and no one knows better than himself that it would not do to turn the light of investigation upon his past life, and so he engaged as Modoc's guide a man who meant to end the miner's career, but was not quick enough for the desperado."

"When Modoc left the town, on his trip back to Colorado, as I judge, Domingo served him by securing another guide, and this one did his work better."

"Killed him?"

"Domingo did not say so; but he said the man returned with Modoc's horse, and reported that the miner had fallen over a cliff."

"Ah! that settles it then."

"I hope so; but I shall not be surprised to see Major Modoc appear at any time, for he is a most cunning fellow, and may have bought off his treacherous guide."

"I hope that he will at least not trouble you again, señor; but now, what is your plan after reaching the hacienda?" said Luis Calera.

"You will, of course, be the guest of Padre Fanchon, and have the run of the Hacienda, while I will be taken care of in the *vaqueros'* quarters."

"I shall discover the force, the movements of

those belonging to the place, and all pertaining thereto, and just what we can do."

"You will make the acquaintance, of course, of the padre's sisters and the Señorita Kittredge, and find out all you can of her position, when you are alone with her."

"Then, when I know the truth, I will write you a letter, which you can copy and secretly hand to her."

"If she wishes to leave the Hacienda, I will return on some pretended errand for you to the town, get our horses and be at a place we may decide upon, where you can bring the señorita, and starting early at night, we will gain a long start and need fear no pursuit."

"My sister will be glad to welcome the señorita, Señor Montebello, should you wish to take her to our home."

"I thank you, Luis; but it will be best for the señorita to go directly to Gold Dust City and claim her inheritance, as, if it becomes known how rich the mines are, it will be most difficult indeed to keep them from being occupied by the Gold Wolves, who will stop at no crime to get gold."

"You know best, señor, and I shall be wholly at your command," returned Luis Calera, and, having arranged their plot, the two friends, for such they had now become, rode on together in silence until they came upon a band of cowboys herding cattle.

These saluted the supposed padre and old guide politely, and directed them to the Mission Hacienda, which soon after loomed up in the distance.

Riding up to the massive gate the *portero* readily admitted them, and soon after Luis Calera found himself seated at dinner with Padre Fanchon, the Sisters Serene and Terese, and Kate Kittredge, the latter seeming pale and looking very unhappy, for the secret of her father's death, which she kept locked up in her bosom, preyed deeply upon her, and she was longing to hear some word from the desperado, who had so well played his part as an honest miner and the friend of Stranger Kit.

While Luis was enjoying the hospitalities of the grand old home, Montebello was well taken care of by the servants, and found himself in a comfortable room in the *vaqueros'* quarters, which was just the point of observation which he desired.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PADRE PREVOST.

NEVER in the world were people more unsuspecting, of entertaining a wolf in the wool of a lamb, than were Padre Fanchon and his good sisters.

The padre was by no means a bad man, in fact he was devout and conscientious in all things, and believed that he was doing his duty in holding Kate Kittredge a prisoner as it were, for she had not shown herself unhappy in her life at the Mission.

Influenced by his brother in this matter, he had held an eye upon the maiden, and meant to do all in his power to have her some day become the wife of Don Diaz.

Padre Fanchon was a poor man, and his sisters were poor, though Don Diaz was the possessor of vast riches.

That he had not inherited his fortune was certain, if only from the fact that his brother and sisters had nothing.

The padre loved his church devoutly, but he also loved a life of ease, and readily accepted the offer of his brother to take charge of the Mission Hacienda, where he would have full control and little to do, while he would want for nothing, and at the same time give consolation to those who sought his services.

His sisters were also true women, pure as gold, and did much good in their quiet way; but they had been brought from the walls of a convent to the Hacienda, by their brother, and they were contented with the life they led there.

If they erred, it was in being influenced by Don Diaz to act as watchers, so to speak, over Kate Kittredge.

They did all they could, as did Padre Fanchon, to make her life happy; but every act that they might construe into disloyalty to their brother, they at once turned a stern face upon.

Therefore it was, when Modoc had called at the Hacienda, and asked to see the maiden, they had endeavored to discover the mystery of his coming upon such an errand, and, as the reader has seen, signally failed.

Since his coming a far more watchful eye had been kept upon poor Kate, and when she persisted in riding out over the prairies, as had been her wont at her pleasure, she had been accompanied by a couple of well-mounted Mexican cowboys.

Rebelling against this, the padre said that he had ordered it, for Indians had been reported in the neighborhood, and it was too perilous for her to go alone.

She therefore could but submit with a good grace, and as the cowboys rode some distance in her rear, they did not annoy her, other than by the thought that they were nothing more than her guards.

So matters stood at the Mission Hacienda at the time of the arrival of the two friends so cleverly disguised.

Kate was anxiously waiting to hear from Modoc, whom she did not doubt to be her friend, Don Diaz had gone off on a trip somewhere, and Padre Fanchon and his sisters were taking affairs in their usual easy way.

Kate alone fretted and was wretched.

A warm welcome was given to the supposed Padre Prevost, and his extreme gentleness toward her won Kate Kittredge to like him.

The supposed youthful padre could tell a good story, was a fine conversationalist, sung well, after dinner was over, and quite captivated all of the party.

As soon as he could do so without attracting attention, Padre Prevost had a talk with Kate, having asked her to show him some rare birds she said were encaged in the garden.

Padre Fanchon had been called to a neighboring ranch to give absolution to some unfortunate Mexican *vaquero* who was dying, and Sisters Terese and Serene were looking after the duties devolving upon them, so that the maiden and the pretended priest went alone to inspect the birds and the beautiful garden.

"Señorita," said Luis Calera, when they had been alone together for some little time; "señorita, have you had a visitor of late, who came to see you especially?"

Kate Kittredge started, glanced at the priest, and her heart asked the question to herself:

"Can he be sent by the miner?"

But she replied aloud, with as much indifference of manner as she could command:

"Yes, Señor Padre, a gentleman visited me not long since."

"Did you know him, may I ask?"

"No, and yes, for he was a friend of my father's," and Kate's eyes filled with tears.

"Describe him, please," said Luis, and the maiden gave an accurate description of Major Modoc as he was the day on which he called upon her at the Hacienda.

"It is the man I supposed, señorita."

"You know him then?"

"I know of him, señorita, and I would ask you if he brought you any word from your father?"

Kate at once became suspicious, for Padre Prevost was the friend of the Padre Fanchon, and she felt that he was trying to discover the real secret of Modoc's coming.

So she said, coldly:

"Señor Padre, the miner of whom you speak visited me as my father's friend."

"More I cannot say."

Luis Calera at once saw how he was misunderstood by the maiden, so determined to come frankly to the point.

"Señorita, I see that you are suspicious of me; but you will confide in one who is your friend, when I tell you that I came to the Hacienda only to see you."

Kate smiled incredulously, and she would not betray that she expected any message from the miner.

"You still doubt me, señorita?"

"You are the friend of the Padre Fanchon, señor, not my friend."

"Indeed, no! I have come a long way to see you, and I am not alone, for my guide also is here to serve you."

"From whom do you come, señor?" asked Kate, still incredulous.

"From one who desires to serve you, señorita."

"His name?"

"He is my guide, Monté."

"An old man, I believe, for I saw you ride in with him?"

"Yes, señorita."

"What interest has he in me?"

"He has come from Colorado, where your father has his mines, which he left to you."

"Ah! do you know that my father is dead?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes, and I know, señorita, that which will cause you to trust me."

"Your father was murdered by some unknown person, but before dying left some papers for you, with written directions what to do."

"These papers were found upon his body, by a young miner who discovered him lying dead in the canyon near his cabin, and this miner, Bugle Bill they call him, was to see that you got them in perfect safety."

"But one person, the chief of a desperado band of pretended miners, known as the Gold Wolves of Colorado, wished to be the bearer of those papers himself, and so laid in wait for the miner, and, as he believed, killed him—"

"Ah!" cried Kate, and she listened with rapt attention.

"Though he failed in taking the life of Bugle Bill, he robbed him of the package and meant to play some deep game, doubtless to get possession of the mine, but was thwarted in this by a man of Gold Dust City who is known as the Gold King."

"The Gold King forced the desperado to give up the papers, and took them to an adjoining camp, where he dispatched a trusty messenger with them to you; but the Gold Wolf Chief, as

I am certain, dogged this second messenger, made an attack on his life, secured the papers, and again started upon the carrying out of his plan, and if he is the man who brought them to you, and from your description of his face and form he must be, he certainly gained his point, and you are the one that can say what his motives were."

Kate Kittredge remained silent and in deep thought, while the young man watched her closely.

Could that man be acting treachery, she wondered, who had come to her as her father's friend?

She must know more before she believed him, so she said:

"This man claimed to be my father's intimate friend and partner."

"Your father, as I understand it, señorita, was known simply as Stranger Kit and had no friends."

"The one you speak of then you say has some deep motive for feigning to be my friend?"

"He has."

"And your motive, señor?" was the blunt question.

"To serve you, by saving you from a designing foe."

"I am aware that you are bound to Don Diaz, and if you get into the power of this man Modoc, it will be even worse than to marry the ranchero."

"Why I am your friend I cannot tell; but I will make this confession, that I came here to save you, and I am not a padre, but am playing the part of one."

Kate started, and cried earnestly:

"With this confession, señor, I cannot but believe you to be my friend, and I will trust you, for I am friendless, alone and wretched here."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PLOT TAKES SHAPE.

THE second day after the arrival of the supposed priest and his guide at the Mission Hacienda, the pretended Padre Prevost said that he would send Monté back to the town, to inform Domingo that he had accepted Padre Fanchon's invitation to remain longer with his hospitable host, who had strongly urged it.

The fact was that Padre Fanchon loved company greatly, and he would be only too delighted to keep his guest with him for an unlimited time.

So Montebello mounted his horse and rode back to the town.

It was the afternoon of the second day before he returned, and then he brought word that a messenger from Mexico had come to call Padre Prevost at once back to his home.

Padre Prevost seemed greatly distressed at having to give up such pleasant company, but hastily bade farewell to all and departed with his guide.

They directed their way to the town, and after nightfall departed, the Señor Domingo bidding his pretended son farewell at the door and wishing him godspeed, while those about the inn also waved good-luck to the travelers.

Once they had left the town on the southern trail, Montebello made a wide circuit until he reached the trail leading to the north.

They had their two led horses with them, and avoiding the thoroughfares all they could, pressed on until they reached the mountains near the place where Major Modoc had been met by the madman, who afterward came to his death by the lightning's stroke.

Here Montebello sought a secluded camping-place, and shortly after midnight the two were quietly sleeping, while their horses were staked near by.

With the sun the two arose, and the youth threw aside his padre garb, appearing in his dress of the border, while Montebello still retained his disguise of an old man, and told his young companion that he wished to remain known only as Monté the Guide.

After a hearty breakfast the two walked up to a commanding position in the mountains and turned their gaze out over the plains stretched before them, their eyes falling on the white walls of the Chapel Hacienda, miles away.

And in those white walls, as their eyes fell upon it, a strange scene was being enacted, for Kate Kittredge had ordered her best horse for a ride, and an inferior animal had been brought out saddled for her, while an escort of four of the worst *vaqueros* of the Hacienda presented themselves.

"I will not ride that horse, for I ordered Arrow," said Kate, her face flushing with anger, as she came out of the Hacienda, prepared for her ride.

"The Señor Padre gave orders that this horse should be saddled for you, señorita," was the answer of the stableman.

"Take my compliments to the Señor Padre, and tell him that I will ride my own horse, Arrow, and allow but two men to accompany me as an escort, and if he refuses, say that I shall claim the protection of the town authorities, with whom I am in communication," and Kate's face was radiant with anger.

As the servant turned to obey, the Padre Fanchon appeared, coming out of the Hacienda.

"I trust you heard my words, Señor Padre, or shall I repeat them?" said Kate, indignantly.

"I heard, señorita, but I cannot understand why you do not wish to ride the mustang."

"He is a wretched animal, and I ride only my own horse, Señor Padre, nor will I be watched by four men."

"I am not as helpless here as you believe, for it is well known to those who can and will protect me that I am treated as a prisoner here, and it will not be permitted."

Padre Fanchon flinched under the angry eyes turned upon him, and he responded quickly:

"It was but a desire to protect you, señorita, for, as I have told you, there are at all times now roving bands of Indians about, and you might be chased by them, perhaps captured."

"Captured, certainly, Señor Fanchon, had I ridden the animal you ordered for me, for I doubt if there is a slower brute in the Hacienda stables."

"The four men, all well mounted, could readily escape, while I would fall a victim to the red-skins," and Kate spoke with a scorn of look and voice that made the padre flinch, for he could not but see that she was right.

"Well, señorita, you can ride your own horse if you see best to do so, but the four men must accompany you," he said, firmly.

"Two are sufficient, and I will not go out with the four, as a couple of them I fear far more than I do the Indians."

"Which two are those?"

"The brothers known as Blonde and Brunette."

"They were bad men once, señorita; but I brought them away from their evil life, and now—"

"They gamble, drink, and only a short while since were arrested on suspicion of killing and robbing a traveler; but with my trusty revolver, and mounted upon Arrow, I will not fear them; so let them go, but no more."

"Very well, señorita, for I wish only to please you," and the padre ordered Arrow saddled, and walked aside to have a talk with the two men known as Blonde and Brunette.

If ever men had rascality stamped on their faces those were the ones, and it was not a wonder that Kate dreaded them.

They were half-breed Mexicans, and had led a hard life, until Padre Fanchon persuaded them to become *vaqueros* at the Mission Ranch, and then they had not mended their ways to any great extent.

As Arrow was brought up to the door, Kate leaped lightly into the saddle, and said, haughtily:

"I wish you men to keep your distance."

The two said nothing, but bowed, and side by side they followed the maiden from the Hacienda grounds.

Kate took a trail to suit herself, and rode slowly along, as though in deep meditation.

A mile from the Hacienda she came to a clump of timber, where the ground was rocky and rough, and riding up to a fallen tree, she dismounted.

There, hidden in a clump of bushes her eyes fell upon a *serape*, evidently containing something of considerable bulk, for it was closely rolled and strapped.

"The peon did his duty, as he promised, for there is my bundle containing all my worldly goods," she muttered, and turning to the two men who had halted at a respectful distance, she continued aloud:

"Men, go to the spring yonder and fill my canteen with fresh water."

She held forth her canteen, and taking it, they rode away a hundred yards to where there was an ice-cold spring.

While they were gone she sprung down from the tree, seized the bundle, and hastily strapped it upon the rear of her saddle, after which she quickly mounted, for she saw the men returning.

As they approached she turned her horse so as to face them, and threw her riding-skirt back so as to hide the bundle as well as she could, but said:

"I found this *serape* in the bushes there, and it evidently contains something of value; but I will not unroll it now, so give me my canteen, and let us ride on."

The men remained silent, but eyed the bundle curiously; but, after watering their horses at the spring, they continued on their way, Kate leading, and taking the trail toward the mountains.

"Ho, señorita, the padre said we were not to go toward the mountains," cried Blonde, riding forward.

"The padre is not my master, Blonde, if he is yours, and I go which way I please, and if you do not care to follow you can return."

"We must follow you, for you are in danger alone."

"Look here, Blonde, I wish to speak to you and Brunette, and I desire that you ponder well my words," said Kate, after she had ridden on

for several miles further, and was now within a league of the foothills.

"Well, señorita, what is it?" asked Blonde.

Kate wheeled her horse about, and said:

"Halt there!"

They stopped where they were, within thirty feet of her.

"How much do you make for watching me?" she asked, bluntly.

"We do as the padre tells us," sullenly answered Blonde.

"And he pays you for it; but I will pay you more to go your way and let me go hence."

"You need not return to the Hacienda, unless you will, and can concoct some story as to what has become of me; but I wish you to let me alone right here, and I'll give you two hundred dollars each to do so."

"Now talk it over and let me know your decision, for I will wait here for you," and Kate dismounted, unfastened her saddle-girths, to give her horse a full breath, allowed him to drink from a stream near, and again tightening the girths, sprung once more into the saddle, a determined look upon her beautiful face.

The two men meantime were discussing the offer made them, and their decision may be guessed when Blonde said:

"Brunette, if we take this money we dare not go back to the padre's ranch, and Don Diaz will make it too hot for us in these parts."

"There's money, and plenty of it, in the Hacienda, and we better stick to our plan to rob it some night and get all, and then we can capture this gal, and if she's got money we can make her pay big to go free, so don't think of her little two hundred-dollar offer now; but she means to jump us and run, that's certain, and she paid somebody to leave that bundle there in the bushes for her."

"Now we'll pretend we want to talk the matter over, so as to get near her, and you have your lariat ready, so that you can rope her horse, if she goes to run, and we'll take her back, for she's game as a grizzly and means mischief, I am certain."

With this they again rode toward Kate, who suddenly called out:

"Halt where you are, and do not come nearer, or I will fire on you."

"What have you decided?" and as she spoke she held a revolver in her hand ready to carry out her threat.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN ARRIVAL AT THE PARADISE.

WHEN Major Modoc, to whom we now return, rode into Gold Dust City after having dispatched Poker Saul upon his search for the secret mine of poor Stranger Kit, he directed his way toward the Paradise Hotel.

He met many who gazed at him with some surprise, knowing as they did, through the Gold King's act, the ruse he had perpetrated about being wounded, and they wondered what he was up to in returning as he did.

Had the Gold King been in Gold Dust, Major Modoc would not have ventured alone into the town, but he was well aware from what Poker Saul had told him that Montebello had departed from the neighborhood, and, he feared, had gone to New Mexico on the trail of Luke Lawless.

He was a bold man, however, in carrying out his wicked plans, and took desperate chances against death.

He wished to ascertain if he could just where the Gold King had gone, and he was desirous of arranging a reception for Don Diaz on his arrival in Gold Dust City.

Did he have time, he could readily set a rumor afloat about Don Diaz, and by bribing men to appear against him could get him swung up before he had time to plead for his life.

As he rode up to the Paradise and dismounted he was met by Colonel Cadaver, who greeted him with:

"Hello, Modoc; thought you were dead!"

"No, colonel, I hain't easy ter knock under, and I has been off prospectin' fer awhile."

"It is lucky you were, for the Gold King has been on your trail like a bloodhound," answered Colonel Cadaver, seemingly taking pleasure in saying things to make the Gold Wolf suffer.

"The Gold King can find me any time he wants to," was the sullen reply.

"He found Cruel Knife Kit, too, and another of your gang."

"How are Kit?"

"Doing well."

"I rid over ter see him, colonel, so I'll hunt his den ef yer'll tell me whar he be, fer I hears he hangs out at ther Paradise."

"Yes; and I guess this is the only Paradise he will ever see; but the Gold King spared his life when he could have killed him, and he is now paying for the best my house affords for him."

"Waal, he are able ter do it; but I wants ter see Kit."

And Colonel Cadaver led the way to the room of the wounded desperado.

"Kit, here's your captain to see you," he said, throwing open the door.

"Durnation! it are you, are it, Modoc?" growled Cruel Knife Kit, who was sitting up in bed with both hands bandaged.

"It are, Kit, and I hev come to see how you are gittin' on."

"Like not ter hev found me."

"So I heerd."

"'Twas ther Gold King did it."

"Yes."

"And I were fightin' fer you, as I know'd you wanted me ter while you was away."

"Yes; I have heerd all about the cirkis, and it were sich thet ther Gold King shell not be forgotten fer it."

"You'll hev ter remember him then, pard Modoc, for I don't want no more recollections of thet game pilgrim, as he are too many fer me."

"I do not fear him."

"Well, you knows best, pard; but I wants more narve than I has got ter tackle him agin, fer he hev thet in him thet are wuss nor a grizzly at bay."

"Well, it will be death for either him or me when we meets," angrily said Modoc.

"It'll be your fun'ral, his cirkis, pard."

"That remains ter be seen; but tell me, are there any strangers here?"

"Yas, I heerd as how thar was."

"Who?"

"A rich Mexican Don, as has come ter claim ther mine o' Kit the Stranger."

"Ah!" and Major Modoc sprung to his feet in a fury.

"When did he come?"

"Last night."

"And he is here now?"

"Waal, I did heer as how he went with his gang out to ther Ill-Omen Mine this morning."

"His gang?"

"Yas, fer he has four Mexikin Greasers with him."

"The devil!"

"Yas, they is about that."

"What claim has he on the mine?"

"He don't claim it, but says thet ther darter o' Stranger Kit are under his pertection, and is now in a convent, in Mexico I believe, whar his brother are ther head doxology chief, and his sisters does ther charity biz, as I hear it."

"All this he has made known here?"

"Yas, so ther kernel tell me this mornin'."

"And he intends to take charge of the mines?"

"Ther Ill-Omen Mine are all Kit had."

"Yes, yes; but do they believe this story of the pretended Don Diaz?"

"Yas, why shouldn't they?"

"Because in this country men should not believe all they hears."

"Does you know him, Modoc?"

"I knows of him."

"Hain't his story gospil?"

"No."

"Waal, out with it then, pard, fer I sees you is holdin' in suthin'."

"The man is not a Don, but he is a Mexican road-agent chief, and he captured the papers, sent by the south-bound mail-coach to the darter of Stranger Kit, and thus got the story of all about the gal, the mine, and jist what ter do."

"Are this so, pard?"

"It is."

"Well, ef yer knows this, and shouts it, thet pilgrim will be strung up afore night."

"You bet he will; but do not say anything about what I told yer, Kit, and I'll jist find out all about his leetle game, git ther boys tergeth'er, put ther Vigilantes on the trail, and yank thet road-agent Don up to a limb afore sunset to-morrer."

"Waal, he'll deserve it."

"Certainly; but now I must be off."

"Can I do anything fer you, Kit?"

"No, Modoc, I is fixed comfortable, and is mending; but go slow, ef yer sees ther Gold King, fer though he hain't a man ter start a cirkis, he are ther last one ter leave off ef he gits inter ther ring."

"I do not fear the Gold King, and lead and steel will kill him, as they will any other human."

"Good-by, pard; but drap in ter-morrer and tell me about the Don."

"I guess you'll hear something before long, Kit; but I wish you were up to help me, for I know I can depend on you."

"Pard, I has lost confidence in myself, for if thar were a man I thought I c'u'd depend on, it were myself; but I were deceived, and it will be some time afore I gits my old grip ag'in."

"Well, a speedy recovery and good luck," and with this Major Modoc left the room.

He met Colonel Cadaver in the hall as he passed out, and told him the same story that he had Cruel Kit, regarding Don Diaz, and then added:

"Now, colonel, thar is a number o' boys in these mines as knows ther road-agent chief I speaks of."

"You refer to your Gold Wolves?"

"No, colonel, I means them as you calls honest miners."

"Who are they?"

"Men as I kin bring to tell you thet Don Diaz, as he calls himself, were Devil Don of the Santa Fé trail, for I has been robbed by him, and so has men I knows, as I says, in these

mines, and it hain't no fair to have a Mexican come here and rob thet poor darter of Stranger Kit out of her inheritance."

"That is so, Modoc; but this fellow seems all square, tells a straight story, and don't wish to take charge of the mine, but says he only came to see about it for Kit's daughter; besides, he has four men with him, who—"

"Them is his road-agents."

"They may be; but I heard that the road-agent chief, Devil Don, of whom you speak, was killed three years ago."

"So 'twas reported; but it hain't so, and I'll gamble on it thet this Don are ther man."

"Well, bring up your proof, and if he is, you'll see how quickly I will, as captain of the Vigilantes, have him strung up to yonder tree."

"I'll fetch ther men, colonel, to swear to him."

"How do you know he is Devil Don?"

"I seen him this morning, on his way up ther mount'in trail, and recognized him, and Kit told me what he called himself, and why he had come."

"Well, bring your proofs, as I said, Modoc, and the Don and his men will pass in their checks very soon," and Colonel Cadaver watched Major Modoc as he rode away from the Paradise, while he muttered:

"Set a thief to catch a thief; but the Gold Wolf may be right, and I'll see that this Don is looked after, for Stranger Kit's daughter shall not be robbed of the large fortune the Gold King told me she had been left by her father."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MAJOR MODOC PLAYS A TRUMP CARD IN HIS GAME WITH DON DIAZ.

WHEN Don Diaz left the room of Major Modoc in the Domingo Inn he felt a thorough doubt of that individual, and determined to act accordingly.

He suspected that the miner was playing some deep game, and had not merely visited the Señorita Kate to tell her of her father, and he wished to discover just what he was and why he had come.

So he put a trusty spy upon the miner, with orders to watch him thoroughly, and before midnight his man appeared with information that Modoc had a spy watching the Don, while he had also made preparations for an immediate departure.

There was one of the Don's servants whom he was suspicious of, in fact two of them, and these he sent for, giving them the following instructions:

"You will mount two of my horses, you Benito disguising yourself as well as you can to look like me, and wearing my clothing."

"About dawn start on the northern trail, and continue leisurely until I overtake you."

The men obeyed, and, as the reader will remember, rode on to their death at the hands of Major Modoc and his treacherous guide, who was in Domingo's pay.

The treacherous spy whom the Don had set to watch the miner followed on his trail, and meeting the guide returning alone, had hidden in a thicket, allowing him to pass, and riding on had discovered, for he was a splendid plainsman, just what had happened, for he saw where Modoc had gone over the cliff, and then trailed him up the ravine to the camp of the two dead men.

Having made the discovery that his fellow servitors of the Don had been slain, the spy set to work to bury them, and then took up the trail left by Modoc, after departing with the bones of the dead men.

He saw which way this trail led him, and then, turning off from it, struck across-country at a lively gait.

A ride of some hours brought him to a large trail leading northward, and dismounting he examined the ground closely.

"They have not passed yet," he muttered, and he went into camp near by.

But before long he heard the approach of hoofs, and into sight came Don Diaz and four men.

They were all well mounted and riding at a good pace, but came to a halt as their eyes fell upon the spy, who stepped out into the trail.

"Well, Bueno, what news?" cried the Don.

In a few words the Mexican spy told what he had discovered, and the Don laughed instead of showing regret for the death of his servants.

"Well, Bueno, that fellow meant to kill me, but Benito suffered in my stead."

"You have done well, and I have more work for you."

"I am ready, señor," was the quiet response.

"I wish you to go back and follow the trail of the miner, and then come to Gold Dust City to let me know."

"Yes, señor."

"I will be there for some little time, perhaps, but I do not wish to have you seen speaking to me, as, appearing to be strangers, you can better serve me."

"Stop at the same hotel that I do, and keep your eyes and ears open, posting me only in writing, which you must find some way to give to me."

"Yes, señor."

"Now mount your horse and be off, and if you serve me well I will make you rich; but fail me, and I will kill you."

"Yes, señor."

And Bueno went back to his horse and at nightfall once more reached the trail of Modoc.

Camping through the hours of darkness, he pushed on with the first glimmer of dawn, and trailed the miner to the canyon where was the camp of the Gold Wolves.

Convinced that he had run the miner to his den, he went on to the Paradise Hotel, where Don Diaz and his escort of four men had already arrived.

Putting up at the hotel, he had that morning communicated to Don Diaz that Modoc was in Gold Dust, when, after the ranchero had ridden off to investigate the inheritance of Kate Kittredge, he had seen the miner riding up.

At once he drew his hat over his eyes, tilted his chair back and pretended to be asleep, and thus had heard all that had been said between Colonel Cadaver and Modoc regarding Don Diaz being Devil Don, the Road-Agent.

Shortly after Modoc left the hotel the spy pretended to waken up, had a chat with Colonel Cadaver regarding the prospects of striking a rich lead in those parts, and saying that he would go prospecting for awhile, he mounted his horse and rode away, following the trail taken by the Don and his men.

He trailed them readily to the cabin of Stranger Kit, and there he saw the roan horse of Don Diaz staked out to feed, but the animals of the four men who had accompanied him were not visible.

As he rode up the Don came out of the cabin, his hands grasping each a revolver, for he had heard the approaching hoof-falls.

"Ah! my faithful Bueno, it is you?" he cried, upon recognizing his spy.

"Yes, señor."

"Why have you come here?"

"To warn you, señor."

"What is there to be warned of, Bueno?" coolly asked the Don.

"Señor, I saw the man, whose trail I followed from our town, ride up to the Paradise Hotel this morning."

"Well."

"I have discovered him to be, as I told you, señor, the chief of the gang of desperado miners, whom they call here the Gold Wolves."

"So you wrote me, on the slip I received this morning."

"And more, señor, though he is hated and feared here, he yet has power, and his aim is the same as your own."

"How do you mean?"

"He aims to get possession of these valuable mines, left by Stranger Kit, by marrying the daughter."

"Ha! say you so, Bueno?"

"Yes, señor."

"You know this?"

"I have discovered all I cared to know regarding him, to show up his plans."

"He went to the Mission Hacienda as the friend of this man, Carl Kittredge, and thus gained the confidence of the Señorita Kate."

"Your coming here, without doubt, brought him back."

"There he played the part of an honest miner, but here he is known as a desperado of the worst kind."

"He determined to thwart your plans, by coming back and getting the best of you; but finding that you already had arrived, and your story was believed, he saw but one way to get rid of you."

"And that way?"

"He has denounced you as Devil Don the Road-Agent of the California Gold Trail."

"Caramba!" cried Don Diaz, the word fairly hissing between his lips, while his face turned livid.

"Yes, señor, he claims that you killed the messenger, bearing the papers to the Señorita Kittredge, that told her of her inheritance, and thus gained possession of the secret, so came here to claim the mines."

"But Devil Don is dead, you know, Bueno?"

"So Colonel Cadaver said, for the man was talking with the landlord of the Paradise; but this Modoc said that he could bring men to recognize you as Devil Don, and the Vigilantes will seize you upon your return to-night and make short work with you."

"My noble Bueno, you are as true as steel, and ever have been; but what would you advise?"

"That you mount your horse and return with me to the ranch with all speed."

"But these mines?"

"You are very rich, señor, and you had better have your life and what you have than lose it trying to get more."

"You argue well, Bueno."

"I argue for life, señor; you love the young lady, and she will become your bride, and you can readily tell her that the mines are worthless, and she will be content."

"But if I remain here I may—"

"You will be swung up to a tree before sunset."

"You think so?"
 "I know it."
 "Then I will follow your advice."
 "Is there anything at the inn that you wish?"
 "Nothing of value, Bueno, as I always travel ready for just such a contingency as has just occurred," was the grim response of the Don.
 "Where are the men, Señor Don?"
 "Scattered through the mountains, searching for Kittredge's other mine, that I know he had."
 "When do you expect them to return?"
 "Hardly before to-morrow night, when they were to join me at the Paradise, unless they made a discovery sooner."
 "Then they will be seized and strung up."
 "That will not be you and I, Bueno."
 "True, señor; but do they know nothing?"
 "Not a word."
 "I am Don Diaz Murillo, and if they allow them to tell their story, and seek to prove it by coming after me, they can find out; but, should I remain here they would hang me, as you say, for these wild men go mad for blood, and then seek to find out afterward whether I was really Don Diaz or Devil Don."
 "Come, señor, we have no time to lose, for there are dangerous men about these mines, and we want all of twelve hours' start."
 "Yes, we have several hours to-night, and can ride until midnight, while they certainly cannot strike our trail before dawn, as they will await my coming back until late."
 "Once we have reached our country, Bueno, we can give these fellows a reception they will remember, and convince them, too, that I am Don Diaz Murillo."
 "Yes, señor," calmly answered Bueno, and while the Don closed up the cabin of Stranger Kit, he got his horse ready for him.
 Ten minutes after the two men rode into a recess of the mountain and pressed hard upon their way, Don Diaz coolly leaving his four companions to whatever fate might overtake them.
 And, when night came upon Gold Dust City, a wild, excited throng had gathered, and the Gold Wolves were busy urging all up to fever heat, for Major Modoc had laid his plans well, and meant that Don Diaz should be seized, immediately upon his return, that he should be recognized by many as Devil Don of the California Gold Trail, for he had paid men well to so recognize him, and that, in the excitement of the moment, he would be hanged by the Vigilantes, under the clamor of all for his death, as he had come there to rob a poor girl of her inheritance.
 This was Major Modoc's plan, and it would have worked well, but for the fact that Don Diaz and his men failed to put in an appearance.
 Until the next morning the crowd waited for the coming of their victims, for the Don and his four comrades were all to suffer; but they came not, and, convinced at last that they had escaped, the Chief of the Gold Wolves returned in a bad humor to his cabin, to find that Poker Saul had been driven away from his search for the secret mine, by seeing the ghost of Red Darrel, the road-agent.
 Thwarted in not having brought the life of Don Diaz to a close, and thus placing that dangerous rival out of his way, his next dream was to remove Montebello the Magnificent, by fair or foul means, and thus become the Gold King himself, instead of being the Gold Wolf of Gold Dust City.
 Finding that Poker Saul had only ill-tidings to report, and generally enraged, Major Modoc again mounted his horse and started for the Paradise, for he meant to start a party on the trail of Don Diaz, by offering a large reward for him, dead or alive, for the Gold Wolf was by no means a poor man, though where he kept his dust hidden no one knew.
 Another thing the Gold Wolves' chief meant to do was to lay his plans to get the drop on the Gold King in some way, and this he could only do by being on the watch for him.
 Could he kill Montebello, he knew he would become the greatest hero in Gold Dust City.
 There was one thing that troubled Major Modoc, and that was that Bugle Bill's body had not been found, nor had it been buried.
 He had gone to the base of the cliff, where he had thrown the young miner, but not a trace of the body was there, and certainly wolves could not have carried it away.
 He did not know at what moment, too, the Gold King might return, so he had his hands and brain full as he rode back toward the Paradise.
 Turning out of the canyon he suddenly came upon a horseman.
 It was one of Don Diaz's escort he knew, by his dress, appearance and the description he had heard of them.
 The man was riding leisurely along, going toward the Paradise, and unsuspecting of danger, when suddenly Major Modoc covered him with his revolver, and springing alongside of him, cried:
 "You are my prisoner, señor!"
 The Mexican was startled, and in broken English answered:

"Caramba! what for, Señor Americano, dat I prizerer?"
 "You are one of Don Diaz's men?"
 "Yes, señor."
 "You are my prisoner; come with me."
 "I come, señor, for you hab me very sure to kill; but I hab done nodings."
 "Where have you been?"
 "In de mountings; look up de mine for Don Diaz."
 "Ah! where is Don Diaz?"
 "At de Baradise Hotel, señor."
 "He is not."
 "Ah, señor, he tell me to come there."
 "When?"
 "Yesterday."
 "Where was he?"
 "At de mine of de Señor Kit."
 "At what hour?"
 "Before noon."
 "And you have not seen him since?"
 "No, señor."
 "What did he tell you to do?"
 "To find de mine, señor."
 "Stranger Kit's mine?"
 "Si, señor."
 "Did you find it?"
 "No, señor."
 "Where are your comrades?"
 "I know not, señor."
 "Did they not go with you?"
 "Yes, señor, for leetle ways; but den dey looks alone in other parts for mine."
 "I see; and all had orders to join your chief at the Paradise Inn?"
 "Yes, señor."
 "Well, I know just who your chief is."
 "Don Diaz Murillo, señor."
 "No."
 "No?" asked the Mexican in surprise.
 "Yes; and I know what you are and your comrades are."
 "Vaqueros, señor."
 "Yes, you pretend to be; but you are mountain bandits, and your chief is Devil Don, the Road-Agent of the Gold Trail."
 "Ah, no, señor, you was mistake."
 And the Mexican smiled incredulously.
 "You will soon know whether I am or not."
 "Ride on."
 "Yes, señor."
 And the Mexican urged his horse forward, while Major Modoc rode by his side, covering him with his revolver.
 As they rode along and met any one, Modoc called out that he had captured one of the Gold Trail Road-Agents, and the result was that they soon had a hooting, savage crowd at their heels, shouting for the Mexican's life.
 A wild mob, such as followed Modoc and the Mexican, were not given to listening to reason, and it needed but a word to hurry the victim away to his doom.
 Believing as he did the story of Modoc, Colonel Cadaver would say nothing to befriend the poor fellow, and Parson Pete, purely from a humane motive, urged that the man be kept for trial by the Vigilantes; but he was not listened to, and crying for mercy, the unfortunate victim of a mob's fury was dragged away to a tree that had taken a most prominent part in just such scenes, and a lariat having been placed about his neck, he was run up into mid-air, struggling, praying, dying.
 Appeased by the death of their victim the crowd turned to Major Modoc as a hero, and instantly he offered a reward for Don Diaz, springing upon a tree stump and shouting:
 "Two thousand dollars for the head, dead or alive, of Don Diaz, whom I know to be Devil Don, the Road-Agent."
 A yell greeted these words, and half a score of men separated instantly from the crowd to strike the trail of the Don and win the reward.
 "Five hundred dollars for the head, dead or alive, of each one of his men who came here with him," again shouted Modoc.
 And in the midst of the yell that followed the words two miners rode up with a prisoner.
 It was a second one of the four who had been the escort of Don Diaz.
 He turned livid at beholding his comrade hanging to the tree; but before he could say aught he was seized, dragged from his horse, and instantly another victim of the crowd's madness hung in mid-air.
 "Men, who are the captors of that man?" called out Major Modoc.
 "We found him in the hills and took him in, for he looked suspicious," said one of the two miners, who came forward as his captors.
 "You did well, and here is your reward," and Modoc instantly counted out the five hundred dollars, the act making him a greater hero in the eyes of the crowd about him.
 "Now let the Gold King arrive if he dare, and I will make these men swing him up to yonder tree," muttered Major Modoc, delighted at the success of his plot thus far, and gloating over the power he had suddenly won over the miners who were not of the band of Gold Wolves.
 As no other victim came forward to satiate their fury, the crowd gradually cooled off, while Major Modoc, reveling in his honors, as he called the name he had won, took up his quarters at

the Paradise, the one aim now of his life to await the coming of the Gold King, for he was the only barrier now between him and his triumph, and once he laid Montebello low he would be king of Gold Dust City, and Kate Kittredge should be his bride.

CHAPTER XXXIX. THE RACE FOR LIFE.

THE reader will remember that Kate Kittredge was left in a most perilous situation, for she was upon the prairie, face to face with Blonde and Brunette, two half-breed Mexican desperadoes of cut-throat notoriety most unenviable.

As she uttered her threat to kill them if they advanced nearer to her it brought both to a halt.

They saw that she was not to be trifled with, and more, they were amazed at the sudden hostility she showed toward them.

Blonde found voice first and said:

"We has decided to accept your terms, señorita, so if you'll pay us, we'll leave yer go yer way and lie out of it as best we can."

"You'll do the latter to perfection; but I do not believe you when you say you will accept my gold and allow me to go."

"We does mean it," said Brunette.

"Why then do you hold your lariat ready to rope me?"

"No, go! and I'll take my own course."

As she spoke she raised her revolver, just as one of the desperadoes whirled his lariat to throw it.

Quick as a flash she aimed and pulled trigger, and the man's arm fell helpless to his side, the lariat falling short in the throw.

A yell of rage and pain broke from the wounded man, while his brother spurred forward to catch the bridle-rein of the brave girl.

But again she fired, and the bullet slightly wounded the horse; but it gave her a chance to wheel Arrow and dart away in flight.

Instantly with savage oaths they darted in pursuit and the race for life began.

"Kill her, Blonde," cried Brunette.

"No, or the Don will kill us."

"Her horse is fast, but ours will run him down, and we'll catch her in time, for this wound on my brute don't amount to anything."

"This wound in my arm does, though."

"Then stop and dress it as best you can, while I keep on."

"No, I'll hold on as long as I can, for there hain't no bones broke and it don't bleed to scare me."

And so on the two villains rushed in hot chase, spurring their horses hard to force them to keep up with the fleet animal that Kate Kittredge rode, and which seemed to fairly fly over the prairies.

"Tain't no use, Blonde, that horse are dropping us, and I intends to act," said Brunette.

"What do you intend to do?"

"Wound the brute."

"Be careful you don't hurt the girl."

"I'll be careful," and stopping short, he sprang to the ground, threw his rifle over his saddle and fired.

Arrow sprang into the air with a wild snort, but still held on.

"He's hard hit, and now we can catch her," cried Brunette, springing into his saddle once more and pushing on after his brother.

It soon became evident to the desperadoes, by the manner in which Arrow ran that he was suffering from his wound.

The maiden held him firmly in hand, seeking the best ground for him, and seemed to realize that he could not last long.

But still she pressed on, striving to reach a small clump of trees a quarter of a mile distant.

"Once there I can stand at bay, and I will die before they shall take me," she said almost fiercely.

Nearer and nearer to the thicket she drew, but slower and slower went poor Arrow, and he staggered more and more.

A hundred yards more and the goal would be reached, when suddenly Arrow stumbled badly, could not recover himself, and fell heavily.

Kate gathered up her skirt and saved herself from a severe fall, but she dropped to her knees, and, as she sprung to her feet and started to continue on foot her flight, her eyes fell upon a horseman suddenly dashing out of the thicket.

"It is the old guide. Heaven, I thank thee!" she cried, and she sunk down by the side of her dying horse.

The two desperadoes, with their eyes upon the maiden, seemed not to have discovered the stranger until he was almost upon them.

Then there broke from the lips of each a warning cry, pistol-shots rung out, a horse, a rider fell, then a second rider, and the Gold King, in his disguise of an old man, stood gazing calmly upon the scene, his dead horse by his side.

But Kate Kittredge was saved, one of the horses of the dead desperadoes was living, and would supply the place of the Gold King's steed, while, coming across the prairie with the led animals was Luis Calera, hastening to the scene.

"Lady, you are saved, and if you will place

your trust in my young friend, Señor Luis Calera, he will lead you out of all danger," said the Gold King, still standing aloof from Kate Kittredge, and speaking in a deep voice that seemed, from some reason, to tremble with emotion.

"Oh, señor, I owe you more than my life, and I fully trust to you and the Señor Calera," cried Kate, stepping forward and extending her hand.

But the disguised Gold King seemed not to see the proffered hand, and set to work to unstrap the saddle from Arrow, while Luis Calera coming up Kate turned to him.

A few hasty words of adieu from the Gold King, and with Kate mounted upon one of the led horses, and Montebello upon the other, the animal of Blonde being pressed into use to carry the pack, the two rode away at a rapid gait, taking the trail through the mountains that led to Colorado, the Gold King riding far in advance and leading the way, and keeping that distance as though to avoid companionship with the maiden whom he had so bravely rescued from a life of imprisonment.

CHAPTER XL.

PARSON PETE HOLDS TRUMPS.

SEVERAL weeks passed away, after the hanging of the two Mexicans, who had been the comrades of Don Diaz, and yet Gold Dust City continued in a state of feverish excitement.

The Gold King did not return, and this caused surprise, and rumors began to float about again that he was afraid to put in an appearance, knowing that Major Modoc meant certain death to him.

Other rumors were that he was trying to get possession of the Ill-Omen Mine, had killed Bugle Bill and taken the papers left by Stranger Kit from him, had found the secret mine, and was generally plotting to grasp all the wealth in Gold Dust City.

Did any one sift these rumors it was found that they sprung from one source, for they could be invariably traced to Modoc, the Gold Wolf.

As to that individual he was full of prosperity, and men were singing his praises daily.

He scattered his money about freely, gave Parson Pete a handsome sum for his church, took up quarters at the Paradise, and seemed, in popularity, to have stepped into the Gold King's boots, figuratively speaking.

He had changed his miner's garb to a jaunty attire, had been ready with knife and revolver to back up all his assertions, and the Gold King not being there to speak for himself, the fickle natures to be found in a mining-camp stamped over to the new hero, Major Modoc.

Parson Pete was on the highway to favor, too, as his church had been built and was an imposing edifice for Gold Dust City, while a large log cross served as a reminder of its sacredness, and also as a tower.

The parson's really fine voice drew crowds every Sunday morning and afternoon, if only to hear him sing the hymns; but then he had a telling way of repeating Scriptural stories, selected Joseph, Samson, David and other prominent Biblical characters for his heroes, and interested his audience in them from first to last.

His prayers were curiosities, for he prayed for all the heathen and miners in the world, excepting those that most needed it, his congregation; but the parson was too nice a man to be personal, and his experience had taught him to weigh well his words.

He would have his whole congregation, five hundred in number, singing in one grand swelling chorus,

"Nearer, my God, to Thee,

while mentally he concluded that they were but one remove from Satan.

When he passed around the contribution-box—his own hat—he generally got it full of gold-dust, and in some cases, where a gambler had no money, he would drop in a "chip" or two, representing a certain amount, and the parson would call at his gambling-room, saloon or cabin, as the case might be, the next day, and let the giver redeem it for so much ready cash.

On one occasion a miner had put in a revolver and belt, and the parson had quietly buckled it about his waist and returned to the pulpit with it.

In his dress he put on no airs, wearing a red shirt, black pants in top-boots and a slouch hat on week days, but putting on his black suit, white tie, high hat and deaconish look for Sunday.

For some reason Major Modoc had become his warm patron, and the Gold Wolves turned out *en masse* to sit under the spiritual teachings of Parson Pete.

Each day did the godly man go on his rounds to see what good he could do, and then it was that the offerings on Sunday were used for the welfare of those in need.

Each day, too, the parson was wont to gallop up to the cabin of the Gold King, though he seldom stayed long, and he was constantly asked:

"Is ther Gold King come?"

"No."

"Does yer think he hev got ther narve ter put

in an appearance with Major Modoc a-layin' fer him, parson?" would be the next question.

"Yes, verily, for he feareth no man, and like David he will smite his foes be they ever so strong."

Colonel Cadaver and Señor Señora were firm friends of Parson Pete, and he seemed to take great pleasure in their society.

He still kept his room at the Paradise, and had converted even the Chinese waiters by his preaching, while the "belles of the kitchen" gave him the best the house afforded.

One Sunday morning early Parson Pete rode up to the cabin of the Gold King, and when he returned he found his congregation patiently awaiting.

When he entered he was not alone, for a man slowly followed him, a man who walked on crutches.

One great roar went up from the throng, and Bugle Bill's name was upon every lip.

But Parson Pete led him to a seat near him, quickly opened with prayer, and then gave out a hymn, in which Bugle Bill's superb voice was loudest, and which seemed to literally carry the crowd, for it was more than a congregation, completely off of its feet.

If Bugle Bill was there, he certainly was not dead, and therefore had not been killed by the Gold King, was the thought that ran through the crowd, and the young miner loomed up greater that day than did Parson Pete.

Bugle Bill was pale, a trifle drawn in the face with suffering, carried crutches, but looked cheerful.

Strange to say, Major Modoc was not at church that day.

As soon as Parson Pete said "Amen" in his unctuous way, the miners made a break for Bugle Bill.

"Ho, Bugle, how is it?"

"Well, Bill, you hain't dead!"

"How is it, pard?"

"Tell us all from the drop?"

Such were the expressions that went round, and while Parson Pete rapped with his revolver on the pulpit for order, Bugle Bill said:

"Pards, I hain't as dead as you has believed; but I would hev been had not Parson Pete here found me one day, with a wound from a bullet and a broken bone, where I'd been ambushed, shot and tumbled over a cliff into a canyon.

"I was tuk to ther Gold King's, and he set my bones, and ther parson here and Montebello's black folkses hev nussed me round all right."

"Who shootet yer?" yelled a hundred voices in chorus.

"Boys, I was shot from ambush, and the man as did it robbed me, and he got ther papers I hed in keepin' fer ther heir ter ther Ill-Omen Mine, so thet lets thet matter out."

There was a dead silence followed these remarks, and then each man looked at his companions to see if he could read guilt in their faces.

Then Bugle Bill left the church with Parson Pete and went to the Paradise for dinner.

Major Modoc was there, and he had already heard of Bugle Bill's appearance, and what he had said about the ambush and robbery, so he stepped forward and welcomed him in a most cordial way, the young miner receiving his advances in a quiet manner, but with no show of anger.

As the papers left by Stranger Kit had been stolen, the rumor was now set afloat that there was no need waiting for the heir, or heirress, for no one could come to claim it, so that it would be better to have those who dared to do so, take possession.

With this intention Major Modoc rode out to the mine and took charge, saying that he would work it for the heir, should such a person turn up within the year, if not, he would give the year's production to the poor miners of Gold Dust, and then claim the Ill-Omen Mine for himself.

To this many raised objections, considering themselves as much entitled to the mine as was the Gold Wolf chief.

Modoc, however, had possession, and toward evening an angry crowd began to gather in the canyon, and it looked as though a general battle would be the result, with the strongest party to hold the power in the end.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE HEIR TO THE ILL-OMEN MINE.

It was a thrilling scene, there in Stranger Kit's canyon, as the sun's rays were casting lengthy shadows, that Sunday afternoon, for men's natures were aroused to fever heat, and the greed for gold was making madmen of a hundred or more wild spirits.

In the door of the log cabin stood Major Modoc, grim, stern and threatening, and at his back within the room were two-score of Gold Wolves, ready to fight for their chief to the bitter end, so that they could make gold thereby.

Without, in the canyon were two other parties, each containing from two to three-score of men.

One of these consisted of the better natures in Gold Dust City, those who urged the waiting

for the end of the allotted time before any one took possession of the mine, and the other party comprised a reckless lot who were determined that the Gold Wolves should not hold possession.

There they stood, almost equal in numbers, the three separate forces, and yet the Gold Wolves, as holders of the position being the strongest.

A blow or a pistol-shot would bring on a desperate conflict, all knew; but no one wished to precipitate it, though if it was begun, all wished to remain in the *mêlée* to the bitter end.

So matters stood when the sound of hoofs rapidly approaching broke upon the ears of all.

All turned to see who it was, and in amazement beheld a woman mounted upon a superb horse and dashing swiftly toward the scene.

Those in her way fell back to allow her to pass, and she drew rein in front of the cabin, while in a clear, ringing voice she cried:

"Away all of you! for I claim this mine!"

A roar of voices followed this bold announcement, and then a silence like death followed.

All eyes were turned upon her, and they saw that she was beautiful, that she was fearless, and in her right hand she held a revolver, cocked and ready.

"The Señorita Kittredge!" cried Major Modoc, springing forward, and then he added, quickly:

"Lady, I have had hard work to hold your mine for you, and had you not arrived we would have had a desperate fight on our hands, for those men were determined to rob you of your inheritance."

Kate Kittredge smiled and then said, in cutting tones:

"Better that the worst one of them have it, than you, fiend incarnate that you are."

"Ha! do you address such words to me, girl, after all I have done to protect your inheritance?"

"Ay, and you shall hear more from me, señor, for I have not done with you."

"Ho, men, all! this woman is an impostor! She is the wife of Devil Don, and he having failed to get hold of the mine sends her," shouted Major Modoc, determined not to give up the mine.

His bold words staggered the maiden, her face paled, and she drew back, and cast her eyes up over the cabin.

At that instant a man was seen descending from the cliff above, and dropping upon the cabin roof he sprang lightly down to the ground, suddenly confronting Major Modoc, who had not seen him until he appeared before him, his revolver leveled at his heart.

It was apparently a man of three-score, dressed in buckskin, and with long gray beard and hair.

But he was possessed of noble presence, was fully armed, and cried in a voice that was firm as iron:

"Major Modoc, you lie when you say this lady is an impostor, and I denounce you as a murderer and a robber, and more, you are my prisoner!"

"Who are you? Who are you?" yelled many voices, while Major Modoc blanched and dared not move, for he saw that he was under the muzzle of a weapon that remained as firm as a rock.

"Kill him, pards! shoot him down!" cried Modoc, to his men at his back.

"Who are you? Speak, or we fire!" yelled a number of voices in chorus, and the crowd pressed nearer.

The stranger turned toward Kate Kittredge, who sat trembling at the scene, and then he raised one hand quickly, and tearing from his head his sombrero, with it came a long white wig and beard.

"The Gold King!" and the shout that went up made the canyon ring.

"Yes, men, I am he whom you call the Gold King, and I command you to seize that man, for the Vigilantes wish him, and, if his gang protects him, shoot them down as you would wolves!" came in thunder tones from Montebello's lips.

At these words Major Modoc dropped his hand upon his revolver, when a sharp report was heard, and he fell dead in his tracks.

Who had fired the shot none knew; but a shout from above caused all eyes to turn in that direction.

They saw a group there on the cliff, and a puff of smoke drifting away, showed that the shot had been fired from there.

They beheld a woman's form there, Parson Pete, Bugle Bill, still on crutches, Colonel Cadaver, Señor Señora, a strange youth, the tall form of Indigo, the Gold King's negro servant, and they felt that the Gold King had a strong support.

"Men, that man deserved a worse death than he received, as he died by a bullet and not the rope, for he was a reckless desperado seeking to rob this lady."

"He shot down Bugle Bill, leaving him for dead, and robbed him of the papers left by Stranger Kit."

"When I sent those papers by another mes-

senger, he dogged his steps, stabbed him, robbed him and killed the driver of the coach in which the two were traveling.

"He sought this lady out in her home, professed to be her father's friend, and meant to rob her, so he has met a just fate."

"This lady is Miss Kate Kittredge, the daughter of the man you knew as Stranger Kit, and she is heir to her father's mines, and she shall have them, so let no man say nay if he values his life."

A cheer greeted these words, and up into the air went hats in honor of the heiress of the Ill-Omen Mine.

And Kate Kittredge sat in her saddle, her head bowed forward upon her hands, her form quivering with sobs.

"Come, Miss Kittredge, you are to have my horse, while I will remain in charge of this mine, and I have a faithful man in care of the one in the mountains."

"Come, go with me and I will leave you in care of the Señora Estevan," and the Gold King spoke in a voice that quivered.

"I will do as you bid me," was the low answer, and the Gold King led the maiden's horse away, while the crowd cheered wildly, the Gold Wolves taking the body of their chief and skulking back to their canyon.

As the two, Kate on horseback, the Gold King afoot, ascended the trail leading to the cabin, and reached a pine thicket, Kate Kittredge drew rein suddenly and sprung to the ground, facing Montebello.

"And this is our meeting, Drew Herndon, after three long years of separation?"

"The old guide Monte, who has served me so well, is the man to whom I once pledged my hand, but whom cruel fate caused me to part with."

"Oh, Drew! my heart will break to feel that after all in the past, I owe everything to you now," and she covered her face with her hands.

A moment of silence followed, and then the man said, slowly:

"Kate, three years ago I was, as I believed, the happiest man on earth, for I possessed your love; was rich, for my Montebello Ranch brought me a large income, and I looked forward to the future with joy."

"A cloud came, for your father, trusted by my father in all things, was supposed to have swindled our estate to a large amount."

"He said he was innocent, hot words followed, then a duel, and my father, the accuser, fell by the hand of your father, the accused."

"That ended our dream of love, and I became a wanderer."

"I came to these wilds, and the strangest luck dogged me, for I found mine after mine, and putting men to work them became exceedingly rich."

"A strange fatality brought your father here, and fortune smiled upon him."

"He had gone forth, after killing my father, wretched and penniless, and in his wanderings he met one who saved his life, and who in payment demanded a certain sum, or your hand in marriage."

"Your father seemed to be in this fiend's power, strange to say, and he pledged you to him, but asked for time."

"He came here and struck it rich, and when about to return for you, and break the fetters that held you both, one night he was murdered in his cabin."

"That murderer was the man who held power over him, and knowing that he would be able to pay the gold demanded, killed him to marry you, and thus get your inheritance."

"Oh God! my poor father!" groaned Kate Kittredge, and in the same tone the Gold King continued:

"I recognized your name upon the papers left by your father, sifted the plot, and determined to save you, and I have done so."

"I found that your father was innocent of the charge he was accused of by my father, and so was wronged deeply."

"Let, then, that wrong done him, and which caused the death of my father, at his hands—let us bury its memory forever, and live for the future!"

"I await your answer, Kate, whether you will be my wife or not?"

Her answer was to throw her arms about his neck and lay her head trustingly upon his broad breast.

A moment he held her thus, and then he resumed:

"Kate, in bringing you to Colorado, before we reached the ranch of our good friends, the Señora Estevan and her brother, I came upon two men."

"One of them I killed; the other I captured, and, keeping him out of your sight, you do not know that Don Diaz is my prisoner—Nay, do not start, for he is in irons at my cabin, and there we now go, as soon as we join Señora Estevan and the party on the cliff."

"Come!" and the Gold King led the way further up the trail and soon came upon the party that had been seen upon the cliff.

Together they went on to the Gold King's cabin and found there the negress Blue guarding a prisoner.

It was indeed Don Diaz, white-faced and haggard.

Arriving near to Gold Dust City the Gold King had gone on ahead, to his home, taking his prisoner with him, and leaving Señora Stella, her brother and Kate to follow at their leisure.

Arriving there he had sent Indigo to tell Colonel Cadaver, Parson Pete and Señor Señora to join him at a certain point, and thus had come about the scene before Stranger Kit's cabin.

Now that all were together the Gold King brought them face to face with Don Diaz.

A wild cry broke from the lips of two of the party at sight of him.

These two were Señora Estevan and Señor Señora.

"You know this man, Señora Estevan?" queried the Gold King quietly.

"That man made me his wife, and to get my large fortune, killed my poor father."

"Then it was, in despair, that I took my young brother and two servants, and hid myself from him forever, leaving him to revel in my riches," was the reply.

"And you, Señor Señora?" asked the Gold King.

"Alas! I know him but too well, for he won my love, and then, when I found he was false as Satan, he tried to kill me, and, in the disguise of a man, I fled, sought to earn a living as you know," was the reply of the one who now appeared no longer as a man, but as a woman.

"And I know him too, for I have tracked him to earth," added the Gold King.

"Becoming rich by murder and treachery, he, to protect himself, and appear as an honest man, forced his brother, a worthy priest, and his sisters, good women that they are, to live near him, thus giving him a character."

"More, I know of him, and it is that after having deserted the Señorita Bonita here, whom we have believed to be a young man, he became known as Devil Don, King of the California Gold Trail, and giving this life up he won the heart of the Señorita Estevan here and thus gained her fortune."

"It is dark now, so we will not go into Gold Dust City to-night; but on the morrow, Diaz Muriel, I shall take you to the Paradise Hotel, tell your story as I know it, and turn you over to the Vigilantes, and my word for it, that these miners will no longer be cursed by Gold Wolves and such desperadoes as you have proven yourself."

CHAPTER XLII. CONCLUSION.

TRUE to his threat, the next morning the Gold King took Don Diaz, or Devil Don, into Gold Dust City, told the story of his crimes, and within the hour he was hanged by the Vigilantes, who did much more to wipe the stain of outlawry off of the mining-camp by including Poker Saul and some half-dozen other Gold Wolves in the list of "bad characters" to be gotten rid of.

With this wholesome lesson Gold Dust City improved in tone quickly, and within the year it was a place not to be avoided.

Within that year, too, Kate Kittredge became Mrs. Drew Herndon, and Parson Pete officiated, soon after uniting in the bonds of matrimony Colonel Cadaver and Señorita Bonita, long known as Señor Señora, the clerk of the Paradise.

Another wedding also occurred before the year was out, and the Señora Estevan became the wife of Luke Lawless, while the Gold King had Bugle Bill appointed Marshal of Gold Dust City, and in that capacity he proved himself a terror to all evil-doers.

Any one seeing Gold Dust City as it is to-day, under another name, would never dream that it had once been known as Desperado's Paradise, for all of its past evil fame has been swept away from it, though stories are often told of its mining days and the deeds of daring performed by Montebello, the Gold King.

THE END.

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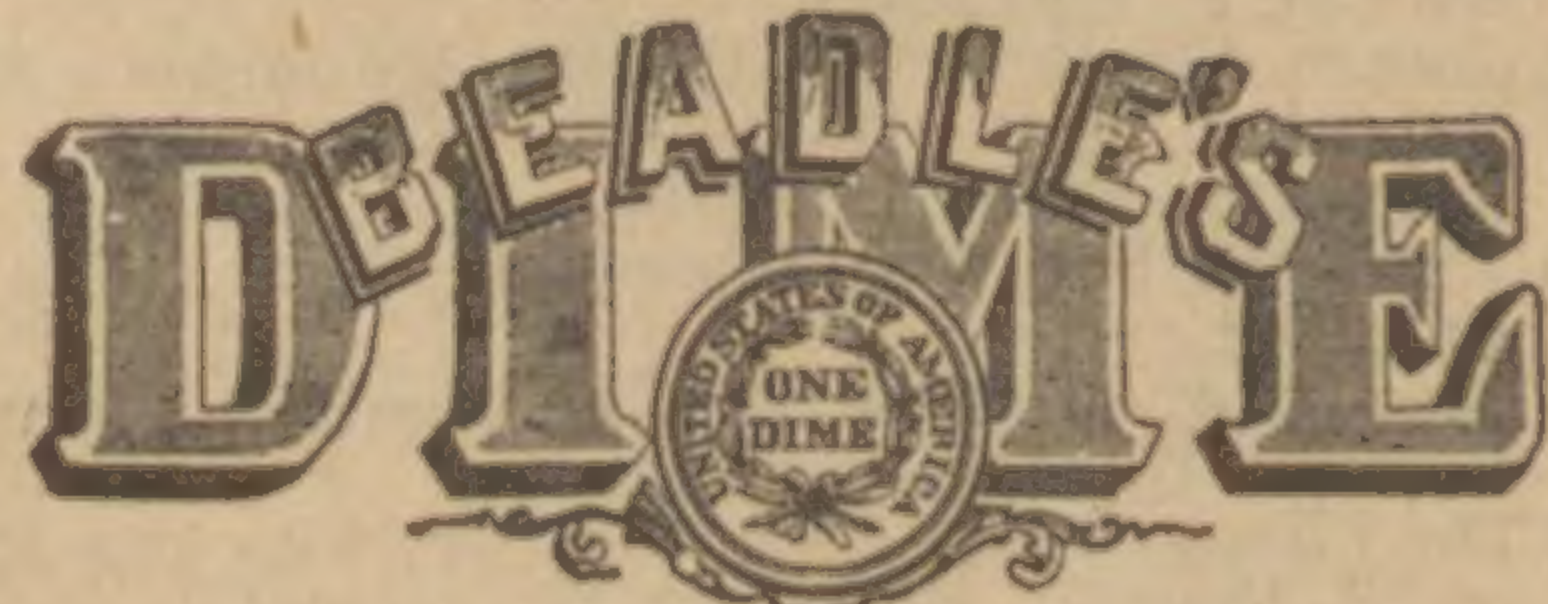
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